Young Adult Literacy Bridge Program Evaluation

Implementation Report

August 2021

NYC Opportunity Response to Westat Evaluation of the Young Adult Literacy Program

When evaluating programs, lessons can come from both the final findings of the research as well as the process of evaluation itself. This has been especially true of this research project – an evaluation of NYC Opportunity's Young Adult Literacy program conducted by the research firm Westat – which has generated useful lessons for implementors of educational services as well as those who seek to evaluate them or other programs.

Young Adult Literacy (YAL) was launched in 2008 by the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity) in partnership with the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) to specifically address the educational needs of young adults, ages 16-24, who read at the pre-High School Equivalency level and were neither working nor in school. By improving academic skills, the program aimed to help young adults advance in education, prepare for work, and reduce their risk for long-term poverty.

As is common in NYC Opportunity's approach, evaluation played a central role in our program management. Multiple evaluations with distinct designs informed key decisions over time to change the program model and expand the program through funding from the NYC Young Men's Initiative.[i] But implementation challenges remained, importantly including struggles promoting attendance and retention. With our partners, we continued to work on these by drawing on best practices identified through evaluation, including emphasizing early and ongoing goal-setting with youth, strong team coordination, and linkages to HSE programs.[ii]

At the same time that we were engaged in this work, the larger policy discourse in the city was shifting significantly to what would come to be called *Career Pathways* – a wider strategy to transform our workforce development system that recommended investment in the creation of bridge programs, or models that pair educational instruction and workforce development services to connect low literacy individuals to clearly defined education and/or employment outcomes.[iii] A growing body of evidence supported this and pointed to the emerging promise of bridge programs to support classroom engagement and produce meaningful outcomes for participants.[iv]

Inspired by the overall potential of this approach and the possibility for the strategy to address the particular challenges we were continuing to face within YAL, NYC Opportunity set out on a new effort to integrate bridge program elements within YAL and rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of this approach for youth who are lower level readers. We planned to use findings to add to the evidence on the effectiveness of bridge programs in different settings, generate implementation lessons for integrating bridge strategies within existing literacy services, and ultimately inform the next steps for YAL.

We recognized from the outset that this would be a big undertaking for us and our partners. We worked from early on with DYCD and the 9 YAL service providers to lay groundwork for the effort and partnered with the research firm Westat on a site-level random assignment evaluation. YAL sites that were randomly assigned to the control group continued implementing the existing program model, consisting of literacy and numeracy instruction, case management, and paid work experience components. YAL Bridge sites received additional funding, technical assistance, and a shared curriculum to help transition over the course of about 6 months to a bridge approach which enhanced the YAL model with three new components: contextualized instruction (teaching academic skills within a sector-specific context); strong programmatic "bridges" between the YAL program and destination programs; and, individualized supports for participant transitions.

We intentionally structured our evaluation plan into two phases. The first focused on examining implementation of the enhanced YAL Bridge model compared to our standard model. Our goals were to identify lessons for implementing bridge programming and provide a foundation for the planned impact analysis in the second phase. The research team conducted site visits which included interviews with program

staff, focus groups with participants, and observations of classroom instruction. The resulting reports document key lessons for those implementing or interested in implementing bridge programming, including:

- Building a shared understanding of "contextualization" and "bridge" is critical and requires clear and continual reinforcement;
- Flexibility and adaptability are important qualities to build into a bridge model for youth, but can also affect adherence to a sector-based contextualized approach;
- Instructors hired after the launch of the bridge pilot adapted to the contextualized curriculum better than those who had been in place prior, suggesting needs for distinct support strategies;
- Adequate, dedicated program staffing is key for developing strong partnerships to support "bridges" to next steps and integrating college and career counseling supports.

This phase of work also showed that there was not a large enough difference in implemented approaches between the enhanced bridge and standard YAL sites to test for impact as originally planned. In practice, the two models turned out to be too similar – reflecting some challenges fully implementing new strategies on an ambitious timeline, but also reflecting that standard YAL control sites had independently adopted some of the same strong programming strategies that the bridge sites used.

These were useful findings that also sent us back to the drawing board on our evaluation plan. With program contracts approaching an end, we were eager for impact findings to help inform our next steps. We worked rapidly with partners to identify a brand-new potential comparison group for YAL as a whole and develop a new impact analysis plan. We were successful in quickly pivoting, completing a matched comparison group impact analysis looking at outcomes for all participants in YAL against those of similar participants in other literacy programming offered by DYCD and public libraries, and using emerging findings in real-time.

Ultimately, the analysis did not find impacts and we were limited in our ability to fully unpack why. From anecdotal conversations between NYC Opportunity, DYCD, and some public library program implementers, we suspected that the program and comparison groups may actually be different – as participants would at least sometimes be directed to either YAL or other literacy programs to achieve the best fit, for example based on their work commitments outside the classroom. We also knew that the study data was limited, not including some key student characteristics related to socio-economic status and prior classroom performance (though we were able to control for highest grade level completed). Unfortunately, our theory that the comparison group was different from our YAL program group could not be substantiated given these data limitations and the limited qualitative implementation analysis included in our revised scope of work.

While it might not appear so, in many ways this evaluation was a success. We used the findings as they emerged – in combination with lessons from other research[v] – to inform our decision to end YAL in 2019 and design a new program through extensive stakeholder engagement. DYCD and NYC Opportunity engaged with service providers, youth, researchers, and other partners to create a pathway of services from pre-HSE through advanced training. This new model, Advance & Earn (A&E), was launched in early 2020 and, as was the case with YAL, we plan for evaluation to play a central role in our program management.[vi]

The challenges we faced in this evaluation illustrate some common realities of advancing evidence-based policymaking: ideal research timelines may not align with needs for program decisions, evaluation plans may need to be modified along the way, and findings may ultimately be inconclusive on their own. These challenges reinforce our commitments to develop adaptive evaluation plans, complement evaluation with other strategies like stakeholder engagement, and keep contributing to a strong collective knowledge base to help inform decisions. We will continue to learn from our evaluations how to improve both programs and our research efforts themselves to more effectively advance equity and opportunity for New Yorkers.

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i All of these evaluations can be found on our website (www.nyc.gov/opportunity). Projects that informed the key decisions noted above include Westat's 2011 & 2013 evaluations of YAL here: https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/yalp_report_2011.pdf and https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/YAL_Final_Report.pdf.

ii For more information on these particular best practices, see MDRC's 2015 evaluation of YAL here: https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/yalp-ceo_2015_report.pdf.

iii For more information on Career Pathways, see http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/careerpathways/downloads/pdf/career-pathways-full-report.pdf

iv See, for example, MDRC (2013) "Enhancing GED Instruction to Prepare Students for College and Careers" here: http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Enhancing_GED_Instruction_brief.pdf.

v Our other research included: results from a concurrent evaluation conducted by MDRC of a related NYC Opportunity program, the Young Adult Internship Program (YAIP); analysis by NYC Opportunity's Poverty Research Unit on the characteristics of out-of-school and out-of-work youth in NYC using the American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample; and, a comprehensive scan of secondary research available at the time.

vi For more information on Advance & Earn (A&E), see https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dycd/services/jobs-internships/advance-and-earn.page.

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from an external evaluation of the Young Adult Literacy (YAL) Bridge program in New York City. Initiated in 2015, the YAL Bridge program was designed as an enhancement to the Young Adult Literacy program, which operated in the city between 2008 and 2020. Like the traditional YAL program, the Bridge program provided academic, career, and social support to young adults ages 16–24 who are disconnected from education and the labor market. The Bridge program included a new academic curriculum that incorporates sector-focused contextualized instruction and provided participants with career preparation experiences and support services designed to facilitate transitions, including to high school equivalency (HSE) preparation programs.

The evaluation was designed to examine both the implementation of the Bridge program and its impact on participant learning. Fifteen program providers, including libraries and community-based organizations (CBOs), participated in the evaluation. To examine impact on participant outcomes, the evaluation was set up using a randomized control trial (RCT) design to compare participants in seven sites that were randomly selected to implement the Bridge program to participants in eight sites that continued to implement the traditional YAL model. The evaluation was conducted by Westat, Metis Associates, and Branch Associates between 2016 and 2017, with support from the New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity) and Young Men's Initiative (YMI), which also support the YAL Bridge program in partnership with the city's Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD).

Although the impact assessment was a key objective of the evaluation, NYC Opportunity and the evaluation team recognized that differences in achievement might not be observed if the Bridge program was similar to traditional YAL in practice. For this reason, the evaluation also included an implementation study designed to provide an in-depth picture of how the Bridge program works "on the ground" and how Bridge compares, in practice, to traditional YAL. The evaluation was therefore structured in two phases: (1) an implementation study and (2) an impact study. It was expected that findings from the first phase would inform the second, including helping the team determine if the planned impact study would be worthwhile to pursue.

The focus of this report is on the implementation of the YAL Bridge program and how the program compares, in practice, to traditional YAL. The implementation assessment was designed to examine the extent to which the sites selected to implement Bridge have done so, what successes and challenges the sites have encountered, and how the implemented Bridge program compares to the traditional YAL model. The implementation study focused on the three core components of the YAL Bridge program, shown in the box to the right, and how implementation of these components was similar or different to activities taking place in traditional YAL program sites.

The implementation study included document reviews, telephone interviews with program staff, focus groups with technical assistance providers, and in-person site visits with the 15 sites implementing either the Bridge program or the traditional YAL program. The implementation study was designed to answer the following evaluation questions:

> **THREE COMPONENTS OF THE YAL BRIDGE PROGRAM**
>
> **COMPONENT ONE:** Contextualized instruction that teaches participants academic skills against a backdrop of a sector-specific context (i.e., the healthcare and information technology sectors)
>
> **COMPONENT TWO:** Strong "bridges" between programmatic providers and bridge destinations (e.g., high school equivalency programs, employment and training opportunities, internships)
>
> **COMPONENT THREE:** A variety of support services, including career counseling with transition support

1. How similar are Bridge and traditional YAL program sites in terms of a) contextualized instruction, b) creation of bridges to HSE programs/training opportunities/employment, and c) provision of integrated support services?

2. What factors help and hinder the implementation of the three core Bridge components? Are there any other factors, including provision of technical assistance, which help or hinder Bridge sites?

3. What other strategies, if any, are being used in successful Bridge sites? In successful traditional YAL program sites?

4. To what degree do various stakeholders perceive the Bridge addition to the YAL program to be successful? How can the Bridge program be improved?

In early 2020, the YAL and YAL Bridge programs ended when the city launched a new program, Advance & Earn, which combines YAL's approach and lessons with those of another city initiative, Intern & Earn. The new Advance & Earn program will aim to create a continuum of supports for opportunity youth spanning pre-HSE, HSE, and workforce entry. Like YAL, NYC Opportunity, YMI, and DYCD are providing support to the new Advance & Earn program, which launched with six program providers in January 2020.

Findings

Key conclusions and implications of the implementation study appear in the box below. A more detailed summary of findings by evaluation question follows.

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Key Conclusions and Implications

- The Bridge sites made progress putting the new program in place, but remained in a developmental phase particularly with regard to implementation of sector-specific contextualized instruction.

- While the Bridge program had some unique characteristics, such as the new curriculum, the program also shared core features with traditional YAL, particularly transition opportunities and support services offered to participants.

- The evaluation team recommended strengthening the Bridge program through additional focus and clarity regarding the role of contextualized instruction in the curriculum, support for implementing contextualized instruction, and support for adapting the program to meet the unique needs of each site's students.

- The similarities between the Bridge and traditional YAL models could limit the findings of an impact assessment, leading the evaluation team to pursue a revised impact evaluation strategy. The findings of this revised impact assessment are presented in a separate report released in conjunction with this one (Ristow, Chen and Miyaoka, 2020).

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> **Evaluation question one:** *How similar are Bridge and traditional YAL sites in terms of a) contextualized instruction, b) creation of bridges to high school equivalency programs/training opportunities/employment, and c) provision of integrated support services?*

Component one: Contextualized instruction

- Most Bridge sites demonstrated low implementation of sector-specific contextualized instruction.

- Sector-specific contextualized instruction was nearly absent among traditional YAL sites.

- Several Bridge sites took a broader approach to contextualized learning that went beyond a sector-specific focus.

- Bridge sites have made changes to parts of the Bridge curriculum, or selected parts of it to implement, although changes appeared mostly consistent with adaptation guidance provided.

Component two: Bridges to HSE/other programs

- All Bridge sites were implementing this component at a high level with evidence of strong bridges to HSE and/or other programs.

- Implementation of this component was less consistent in traditional YAL sites, but still moderate to high. Traditional sites varied with regard to accessibility of HSE or other programs and the clarity of the transition process.

- Some Bridge sites were further along in the process of formalizing relationships for internships or other job training, but all are working toward this goal.

Component three: Integrated transition support services

- Social and emotional support of participants was common across both Bridge and traditional YAL sites. Similarly, most offered education support, including a transitional component.

- Several Bridge and traditional YAL sites offered various forms of career-focused support, though this was more formalized in Bridge sites through the provision of career counseling.

Evaluation question two: *What factors help and hinder the implementation of the three core Bridge components? Are there any other factors, including provision of technical assistance, which help or hinder Bridge sites?*

Factors Affecting Implementation of the Three Bridge Components

- Implementation of sector-specific contextualized instruction in Bridge sites was limited by stakeholders' understanding of this program component.

- The extent to which staff in Bridge sites felt they were able to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their students influenced use of the curriculum.

- Staffing is an essential factor that facilitated all three components but especially the development of bridge partnerships and the provision of supports.

Role of Technical Assistance in Facilitating Implementation of Bridge

- Technical assistance (TA) was essential to the implementation of the program. Multi-site workshops, TA provider site visits, and responsive communication from TA providers were among the most valued TA supports.

- Bridge and traditional sites received largely the same TA apart from support from the Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI) staff, which was available only to Bridge sites.

- The City University of New York Creative Arts Team (CUNY CAT) was described as providing more intensive, frequent, and hands-on TA than WPTI. WPTI provided more limited specialized support of the Bridge curriculum itself.

Contextual Factors Affecting Other Key Elements of the Bridge Program

- The extent to which a site can benefit from the library or CBO that hosts the YAL program can help or hinder the site's implementation. Those sites that can share the resources and staffing of a larger organization or that can place participants into in-house internships and HSE programs are at a greater advantage.

Evaluation question three: *What other strategies, if any, are being used in successful Bridge sites? In successful traditional YAL sites?*

- There were no systematic differences in the strategies used by Bridge sites and the strategies used by traditional sites. The Bridge model generally did not provide any strategies that were not already present at traditional sites.

- Key strategies used in both Bridge and traditional sites to strengthen their programs included:

  - focusing on the social and emotional needs of participants;

  - actively varied engagement with participants over the course of the program;

  - soliciting youth input to adjust program elements;

  - program flexibility and differentiation according to participant needs; and

  - cultivating a community of participants and staff.

Evaluation question four: *To what degree do various stakeholders perceive the Bridge addition to the YAL program to be successful? How can the Bridge program be improved?*

- Bridge program directors and instructors (especially new instructors) appreciated both the structure provided by the Bridge curriculum as well as the flexibility they felt they have to adapt it.

- Bridge participants were positive about their experience in the program and mentioned improved academic skills and relationships with staff as what they liked most. Program directors, however, had not seen changes in participant attendance or outcomes since adopting Bridge.

- Program directors appreciated the technical assistance provided by both CUNY CAT and WPTI, but several Bridge program directors felt overwhelmed by the pace and scale of implementation

and training requirements.

- Some Bridge sites felt that the focus on contextualized instruction in the curriculum should be expanded to cover more learning activities and broaden the range of career fields explored.

- Implementation of contextualized instruction and strategies for enhancing internships were highlighted by Bridge sites as areas in which additional technical assistance support would be useful.

Introduction

This report presents findings from an implementation evaluation of the Young Adult Literacy (YAL) Bridge program in New York City. The evaluation was conducted by Westat, Metis Associates, and Branch Associates between 2016 and 2017, with support from the New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity) and Young Men's Initiative (YMI), which also support the YAL Bridge program in partnership with the city's Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). In addition to examining implementation, the program evaluation was set up to assess the impact of the Bridge program using a randomized control trial (RCT) design.

About the Young Adult Literacy Bridge Program

The YAL Bridge program was designed as an enhancement to the Young Adult Literacy program in New York City. The YAL program was initiated in 2008 and sought to improve the literacy skills, math skills, and job readiness of disconnected youth in New York City, specifically those young people who read below the level that would qualify them to enroll in a High School Equivalency (HSE) program. To enhance the traditional YAL model, the YAL Bridge program drew on the principles of the New York City Career Pathways initiative, which aims to foster skills that employers seek, improve job quality, and increase coordination among public and private workforce development and service programs operating in the city. One strategy encouraged through the initiative is "bridge programs," which are defined as follows:

> *Bridge programs prepare individuals with low educational attainment and limited skills for entry into a higher education level, occupational skills training, or career-track jobs, building the competencies necessary for work and education alongside career and supportive services. Bridge programs contextualize programming to a specific industry sector and have established relationships with partners (occupational training, education, and/or specific sector employment) who inform program design and serve as the primary destination for program participants.[1]*

The YAL Bridge program followed this definition through its enrollment of young people with low educational attainment and approaches such as sector-focused contextualized instruction and partnerships with bridge "destinations," including HSE programs and work training programs.

A recent review of evidence on career pathways programs, including those that use bridge strategies, noted that while limited in number, impact studies have generally found educational benefits to students enrolled in such programs (Schwartz, Strawn, and Sama, 2018). For example, in New York City, a bridge program offered by LaGuardia Community College had positive impacts on HSE course completion and HSE test pass rates (Martin and Broadus, 2013). An evaluation of nine career pathways

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[1] NYC Bridge Bank. (n.d.). Retrieved January 6, 2017, from
http://www1.nyc.gov/site/careerpathways/strategy/nyc-bridge-bank.page

programs found a majority of programs had positive impacts on student outcomes, including educational outcomes such as credits earned and credential attainment (Gardiner and Juras, 2019). Such evidence suggests the promise of bridge strategies for helping people with low levels of educational attainment. An overview of the YAL Bridge program is provided in the box below.

What is the Young Adult Literacy Bridge program?

The Bridge program was introduced in 2015 as an enhancement to the Young Adult Literacy (YAL) program in New York City. Like the traditional YAL program, Bridge was designed to meet the needs of young adults, ages 16 to 24, who read at a fourth- to eighth- grade level and are not enrolled in school or participating in the labor force. Specifically, the program helped participants build the reading, writing, and mathematics skills needed to enroll in a HSE program (i.e., a program that prepares participants to take the Test Assessing Secondary Completion [TASC] exam). There were three main components of the Bridge program.

Component One
The Bridge program utilized a new academic curriculum developed by the Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI). The new curriculum incorporated **sector-specific contextualized academic instruction,** which places learning of academic skills within the context of the world of work, specifically, the sectors of information technology (IT) and healthcare. For example, in the healthcare sequence, the curriculum placed information about healthcare job areas and places some academic activities within the context of tasks that might be expected of those working in the field (i.e., mathematics problems that ask participants to calculate medication dosage).

Component Two
Providers implementing the Bridge program were expected to develop **pathways (or "bridges") to HSE preparation programs and employment and training opportunities.** Bridge providers may develop partnerships with outside organizations and employers to establish these pathways. The Bridge program also offered wage-paying internships to participants who meet minimum attendance requirements.

Component Three
The Bridge program offered **a variety of social, employment, and academic supports,** including career counseling services, that were intended to help participants make the transition to further education or job attainment.

The YAL Bridge program built upon the traditional YAL program.[2] The Bridge program incorporated some of the same features and approaches of traditional YAL, while adding new features that are consistent

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[2] NYC Opportunity has supported several evaluations examining the implementation and outcomes of the YAL program. See, for example, Hossain and Terwelp (2015), Westat (2013), and Westat and Metis Associates (2011).

with the Career Pathways initiative definition of Bridge programs. Both Bridge and traditional YAL programs served young adults with low educational attainment and academic skills who are disconnected from education and employment. A summary of key features of the two programs is provided in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1. Features of the YAL Bridge and Traditional YAL Programs

Program Area	Program Features	YAL Bridge	Traditional YAL
Population	Disconnected young adults, ages 16-24, whose literacy skill does not meet requirements for HSE preparation course enrollment	●	●
Schedule	Four 2 ½ - 3-month program sessions (or "cycles") per year - Students typically enroll in multiple cycles	●	●
Academics	15 hours of academic instruction per week - Reading, writing, mathematics and science	●	●
	Contextualized academic instruction - 75-90 minutes per day, four days a week - Healthcare and information technology focus	●	
	Balanced literacy and conceptual math instructional approaches		●
Work readiness	Work readiness training (e.g., practice interviewing, resume building)	●	●
	Work readiness experiences (e.g., workplace field trips, job shadowing)	●	●
	Wage-paying internships	●	
	Stipend-paying service learning opportunities utilizing a project-based learning approach		●
Support services	Career counseling	●	
	Social/emotional counseling	●	●
	Transition support	●	●
Participant incentives	MetroCards	●	●
Support to providers	Technical assistance from CUNY Creative Arts Team - Individual and group TA - Support for curriculum/instruction, social supports, student transition, program management	●	●
	Technical assistance from Workforce Professionals Training Institute - Individual and group TA, online community of practice - Support for Bridge curriculum implementation, internships, partnership development, student transitions	●	
	Supplemental funding to support implementation	●	

SOURCE: Bridge program documentation provided by NYC Opportunity; Workforce Professionals Training Institute, 2016; Hossain and Terwelp, 2015.

In early 2020, both YAL and YAL Bridge ended when the city launched a new program, Advance & Earn, which combines YAL's approach and lessons with those of another city initiative, Intern & Earn. The new Advance & Earn program will aim to create a continuum of supports for opportunity youth spanning pre-HSE, HSE, and workforce entry. Like YAL, NYC Opportunity, YMI, and DYCD are providing support to the new Advance & Earn program, which launched with six program providers in January 2020.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The evaluation was designed to assess both the implementation and impact of the YAL Bridge on youth outcomes, in comparison to those of the traditional YAL model. Specifically, the evaluation was set up to compare the outcomes of participants of sites that were randomly selected to use the Bridge program to participants at sites that have continued to deliver the traditional YAL program. The implementation findings presented in this report are intended to both describe how the Bridge model was used in practice and how implementation of Bridge was similar or different to implementation of traditional YAL. One key goal of the implementation study was to inform the planned assessment of program impact.

Evaluation questions

The evaluation explored four questions related to the implementation of the YAL Bridge program:

1. How similar are Bridge and traditional YAL sites in terms of a) contextualized instruction, b) creation of bridges to HSE programs/training opportunities/employment, and c) provision of integrated support services?

2. What factors help and hinder the implementation of the three core Bridge components? Are there any other factors, including provision of technical assistance, which help or hinder Bridge sites?

3. What other strategies, if any, are being used in successful Bridge sites? In successful traditional YAL sites?

4. To what degree do various stakeholders perceive the Bridge addition to the YAL program to be successful? How can the Bridge program be improved?

Although the impact assessment was a key objective of the evaluation, NYC Opportunity and the evaluation team recognized that differences in achievement might not be observed if the Bridge program was similar to traditional YAL in practice. For this reason, the evaluation also included an implementation study designed to provide an in-depth picture of how the Bridge program works "on the ground" and how Bridge compares, in practice, to traditional YAL. The evaluation was therefore

structured in two phases: (1) an implementation study and (2) an impact study. It was expected that findings from the first phase would inform the second, including helping the team determine if the planned impact study would be worthwhile to pursue.

Research design

The evaluation was set up to use a randomized control trial design to estimate the impact of Bridge on participant outcomes. This design informed the structure of the implementation study, which took place prior to the change in the impact study design noted above. In early 2016, 16 sites were randomly selected to implement either the Bridge program (treatment group) or continue to implement the traditional YAL program (control group). Eight sites were selected to implement Bridge, while eight other sites were selected to continue implementation of traditional YAL. All 16 sites were asked to participate in the evaluation.

Following random assignment to study groups, one site assigned to the treatment group ended its contract with the city to provide YAL and was removed from the evaluation. A second site selected for the treatment group decided not to implement the Bridge program but continued to implement traditional YAL. This site remained in the treatment group, based on the evaluation team's plan to use intent-to-treat analysis.[3] Thus, the evaluation findings are based on data collected from 15 YAL sites, seven in the treatment group and eight in the control group.

See Exhibit 2 for a summary of the characteristics of the 15 sites.

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[3] Intent-to-treat (ITT) analysis measures the effect of the offer of treatment by maintaining the original randomized groupings, regardless of attrition or other group changes. An additional analysis reflecting group attrition measures the effect of the receipt of treatment (treatment-on-treated analysis).

Exhibit 2. Characteristics of YAL Sites Participating in the Evaluation

Site	Treatment group (YAL Bridge)	Control group (traditional YAL)	Provider type	Borough
1	●		CBO	Queens
2		●	CBO	Queens
3		●	Public library	Bronx
4	●		Public library	Bronx
5	●		Public library	Bronx
6	●		Public library	Brooklyn
7		●	Public library	Brooklyn
8		●	CBO	Bronx
9		●	Public library	Queens
10	●		Public library	Queens
11		●	Public library	Queens
12		●	CBO	Manhattan
13	●		CBO	Brooklyn
14	●		CBO	Manhattan
15		●	CBO	Staten Island

Implementation data collection and analysis

Implementation data collection included interviews and observations conducted with Bridge and traditional YAL providers as well as review of existing materials. Implementation data were collected both remotely, through telephone interviews with program directors in spring 2016, and in-person during site visits to each participating provider during fall 2016. All 15 providers participated in the evaluation; site visits included the following data collection activities:

- **Document review** of key program documentation (e.g., curriculum materials) and individual site project descriptions prior to site visits to gain background knowledge and context.

- **Interviews** with program directors and other key program staff, including academic instructors and support service providers (e.g., counselors). The interviews addressed topics such as the components of Bridge or traditional YAL that had been implemented to date, the extent to which program staff viewed Bridge as different than traditional YAL, what technical assistance support had been received, and successes and challenges encountered.

- **Focus groups** with program participants. These focus groups explored participant views of the program, types of activities and services engaged in, goals for participating in the program, and future plans with respect to further education and careers.

- **Observations** of mathematics or literacy classroom instruction. The observations focused on identifying examples of sector-specific contextualized instruction, as well as capturing descriptive details such as types of instructional approaches used and participant engagement.

In addition, the study team conducted in-person focus groups with staff from WPTI, which designed the Bridge curriculum and provides technical assistance to Bridge sites, and staff from the City University of New York Creative Arts Team (CUNY CAT), which offers technical assistance to both Bridge and traditional YAL sites. These focus groups explored topics such as the level of program implementation seen at Bridge and traditional YAL sites, types of assistance provided, and views of what additional assistance might be necessary.

Implementation data were analyzed in two main ways. First, observation and interview data from the site visits were used to develop implementation ratings for each of the three main Bridge program components, utilizing a rating protocol.[4] Implementation ratings are based on the sum of three to four subratings for each program component. Overall component ratings were scaled to represent different levels of implementation (no implementation, low, moderate, and high). Ratings were calculated for both Bridge and traditional YAL providers to summarize the level of implementation for each component and the extent to which implementation was similar or different between the two groups.

Second, the research team synthesized interview, observation, and focus group data to develop profiles of each participating site structured around the four implementation evaluation questions. These profiles integrated both the ratings of program implementation and contextual findings related to program implementation at each site. The profiles were completed using a standardized template structured around the four implementation-focused evaluation questions. For example, site visitors compiled for each site a summary of what was learned with regard to factors that facilitated or hindered implementation of the program, including factors specific to individual program components and activities (e.g., contextualized instruction, building partnerships with bridge destinations, recruiting participants, providing transition support). These summaries were then examined to identify cross-case themes addressing each of the evaluation questions related to implementation.

Organization of the Report

The remainder of this report presents findings for each of the four evaluation questions. A brief conclusion section highlights the key findings from the report and discusses the evaluation team's recommendations for the YAL Bridge program, other "bridge" type programs operating in the city (including the new Advance & Earn program), and further evaluation.

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[4] A copy of the protocol appears in Attachment A.

Findings

A.   Level of Implementation at Bridge Sites

In this section we discuss the level of implementation of the three Bridge components across Bridge sites and the extent to which implementation differs from the work at traditional YAL sites. The expected finding was that implementation of the Bridge components would not be present in traditional sites or substantively greater at Bridge program sites compared to traditional YAL sites. This would support the premise of the study design by affirming that there are implementation differences that could feasibly drive differences in participant outcomes.

Key Findings for evaluation question one: *How similar are Bridge and traditional YAL sites in terms of (a) contextualized instruction, (b) creation of bridges to HSE programs/training opportunities/employment, and (c) provision of integrated support services?*

Component one: Contextualized instruction

- Most Bridge sites demonstrated low implementation of sector-specific contextualized instruction.

- Sector-specific contextualized instruction was nearly absent among traditional YAL sites.

- Several Bridge sites took a broader approach to contextualized learning that went beyond a sector-specific focus.

- Bridge sites made changes to parts of the Bridge curriculum, or selected parts of it to implement, although changes appeared mostly consistent with adaptation guidance provided.

Component two: Bridges to HSE/other programs

- All Bridge sites were implementing this component at a high level with evidence of strong bridges to HSE and/or other programs.

- Implementation of this component was less consistent in traditional YAL sites, but still moderate to high.   Traditional sites varied with regard to accessibility of HSE or other programs and the clarity of the transition process.

- Some Bridge sites were further along in the process of formalizing relationships for internships or other job training, but all were working toward this goal.

Component three: Integrated transition support services

- Social and emotional support of participants was common across both Bridge and traditional YAL sites. Similarly, most offered education support, including a transitional component.

- Several Bridge and traditional YAL sites offered various forms of career-focused support, though this was more formalized in Bridge sites through the provision of career counseling.

Component one: Contextualized instruction that teaches participants academic skills against a backdrop of a sector-specific context

Implementation ratings

Overall, the level of implementation of sector-specific contextualized instruction was low across Bridge sites. Site visit data, including interviews and classroom observations, indicated low usage of sector-specific contextualized instruction among Bridge sites. However, implementation of this component among traditional sites was nearly absent. Exhibit 3 summarizes the implementation ratings for this component for the Bridge and traditional sites.

Exhibit 3. Implementation Ratings for Contextualized Instruction, by Treatment Status

| Treatment Status | Mean | Number of sites implementing at each level | | | |
		No implementation	Low	Moderate	High
Bridge sites (n=7)[1]	2.4	1	5	1	0
Traditional YAL sites (n=8)	0.1	7	1	0	0

Note: Three items were rated for contextualized instruction, and the sum of these ratings was used to develop an overall implementation rating for this component on following scale: 0=no implementation, 1-3= low implementation, 4-5=moderate implementation, 6-7=high implementation. Means are based on the overall implementation rating. A copy of the rating instrument is in Attachment A.
[1]Bridge site ratings include the site that was randomly selected to implement the Bridge program but declined to do so after selection. The study uses an intent-to-treat design, which requires this site to remain part of the treatment group. Excluding that site, the mean for Bridge sites is 2.8.

Synopsis of approaches used at Bridge sites

Site visit data provided evidence of contextualized instruction that was more broadly conceived than the sector-specific focus outlined in the Bridge curriculum. In several Bridge sites, contextualized instruction was implemented in a more general way than the curriculum's "sector-specific" definition. This suggested that the sites did not have a shared understanding of what contextualized instruction is. For example, one site's program director reported that contextualized instruction can include more general conversations about life goals or topics that students find more relevant than healthcare or IT, such as civil rights and freedom of expression. Instructors in two sites indicated that they do not always take a "sector-focused" approach to contextualization, opting instead to focus on general workplace themes or discussions of future plans with students. As two program directors said, contextualized instruction was viewed as a way to make the program relevant for participants:

> *We aim specifically at, we're going to take this life lesson idea and we've given them each a career, a salary, and we'll throw little things in there like maybe, getting a promotion halfway through the year or something comes up when your health insurance runs out and you have to pay on your own. Life dilemmas and things like that.*

[W]e try to contextualize every component of the class with each other. Whether it's personal development, the workforce, literacy and math we definitely try and push that through our conversations and some of the content that we use.

Bridge sites used the curriculum, though the extent to which the curriculum was used in its entirety varied. With regard to the Bridge curriculum as a whole, including both contextualized and non-contextualized components, use varied across sites. At least one site was using the curriculum only partially, with the program director indicating use as "50 to 60 percent" at the time of the site visit. An instructor in another site reported using the curriculum about once a week or every other week, although a program director in this site believed that other instructors were using the curriculum with greater frequency. In a third site, the program director reported using aspects of the Bridge curriculum, although with significant adaptation and supplementation of additional material. Three other Bridge sites appeared to be using the curriculum with more regularity, indicated through both interviews and observations of class sessions that featured Bridge lessons and materials.

Bridge sites modified the curriculum and were implementing these adapted versions. Bridge program providers had flexibility to adapt or supplement the curriculum in order to tailor the program to meet the needs of students. For example, the program allowed for instructors to introduce supplemental materials into the program, spend more time on some lessons than others to ensure student understanding, and skip some activities as long as most lessons are utilized. Site visit interviews and observations showed that the Bridge sites made a range of modifications and adaptations, most of which appeared to be consistent with the guidance on program adaptation. For example, instructors in one site are integrating thematic discussions about students' future, while another added supplemental material related to the TABE exam. Other sites made more extensive changes to the program. For example, one site modified Bridge lessons to align the material more closely to the TASC exam and incorporated information about job sectors other than healthcare and IT. As the program director in this site said,

Even though you have handouts in the Bridge curriculum that focus on IT and healthcare, I'm always trying to supplement additional information for students so they say, "oh, I have an option…I'm not just going to be pigeonholed into these two industries."

Comparison of Bridge to traditional YAL

As expected, implementation of contextualized learning at traditional YAL sites was rare. Observations yielded little evidence of instructors incorporating sector-specific activities in their lessons save one site in the traditional YAL group. Similar to the Bridge sites, interviews at a small number of traditional YAL sites illuminated efforts at thematic instruction, the broader concept from which contextualized instruction stems. However, participants at traditional YAL sites pointed to only a small number of examples where there was a purposeful effort to integrate post-HSE plans or skills into academic

instruction. For example, one traditional YAL site program director described efforts to contextualize as follows:

> [I]f it comes up organically then they'll all explore it further, but nothing that's just planned out in terms of lesson planning.

Component two: Strong "bridges" between programmatic providers and bridge destinations (e.g., high school equivalency programs, employment and training opportunities, internships)

Implementation ratings

All Bridge sites implemented strong "bridges" to HSE and other programs. Most traditional YAL sites also demonstrated moderate to high implementation of this component. Exhibit 4 summarizes the implementation ratings for this component for the Bridge and traditional sites.

Exhibit 4. Implementation Ratings for Component Two, by Treatment Status

| Treatment Status | Mean | Number of sites implementing at each level | | | |
		No implementation	Low	Moderate	High
Bridge sites(n=7)[1]	5	0	0	0	7
Traditional YAL sites (n=8)	3.9	0	1	3	4

Note: Four items were rated for bridges to HSE/other programs, and the sum of these ratings was used to develop an overall implementation rating for this component on following scale: 0=no implementation, 1-2= low implementation, 3-4=moderate implementation, 5=high implementation. Means are based on the overall implementation rating. A copy of the rating instrument is in Attachment A.
[1] Excluding the treatment site that declined to implement Bridge, the mean for Bridge sites remains 5. See the footnote at Exhibit 3.

Synopsis of approaches used at Bridge sites

Bridges to HSE programs were common across Bridge sites, while bridges to internships and work were in varied stages of development. Most sites clearly established relationships with HSE providers, and in some cases the Bridge site and HSE prep were one and the same. The partnerships occur both internally and externally, but those relationships were not always formalized. For some sites, long-established relationships with external resources have facilitated implementation of the internship piece of the program, while others were currently focusing on building relationships. Program directors from at least two Bridge sites discussed efforts to strengthen and formalize existing partnerships while identifying additional opportunities for collaboration or partnership.

We always worked with them with college and career, but now with the internship component we have those extra hours after with them to do career readiness. That is different from what we used to do.

[Staff member] assesses the student interests and then looks for a good placement, a host site that is willing to take on the students.

Several Bridge sites provided participants access to bridges internally or through partnerships that focus on a variety of job-related skills. These classes, workshops, and events include assistance with internship applications and a range of soft job skills including interview practice, filling out time sheets, discussions about work attire, and tailoring resumes. In some cases, these bridges take the form of scheduled visits to internship locations, HSE providers, and postsecondary institutions to help provide participants with a clearer understanding of what those experiences look like and familiarize them with the staff with whom they may be in contact there. One program director at a Bridge site discussed early efforts to improve the depth of such offerings.

We're still looking to strengthen what we do. Students do take trips to different schools and we had CUNY come in at one point to do an information session. We're exploring the options on strengthening our college trips.

The type of internships available to participants at Bridge sites varied across sites, as did participant uptake and satisfaction with these options. Internships included working internally for the Bridge site or its host location, tutoring younger participants, food service and retail, and medical training. The approach from site to site differed, often based on the breadth or depth of resources available to them. Both where a site is located and where the population of participants is drawn from may influence what resources are available or how feasible it is for young people to take advantage of those opportunities.

Comparison of Bridge to traditional YAL

As expected, Bridge and traditional YAL sites took similar approaches to establishing pathways to HSE programs. Similar to Bridge sites, several traditional YAL programs had extant relationships with HSE providers, including those internal to the program. Participants in both Bridge and traditional YAL sites discussed tailoring offerings to participants' needs to find the best fit. As one traditional YAL site program director described it,

We know what the cycles are for the other programs that we refer students to and who we think is a good fit, we refer them…we will give them some indication of where we think they would be best suited.

HSE pathways were seen as more structured or formalized in some Bridge sites. The steps for participants and plans for their transition appeared less formalized at a number of traditional YAL sites,

with less evidence of concrete planning for this process than at Bridge sites. As one program director that oversees both Bridge and traditional programs said, "Bridge sites are just more structured than non-Bridge."

Internships were a distinguishing feature of Bridge sites, although traditional sites sometimes connected students to similar opportunities through less formal channels. As expected, the opportunity for internships, or early planning to make such opportunities available, set the Bridge sites apart. Several traditional YAL sites coordinated service learning projects or offer participants access to employment workshops or soft skills training programs. However, most did not provide structured access to internships or employment opportunities. For example, a few traditional sites were found to offer opportunities for students to pursue internships, but these tended to be offered organically or on an as-requested basis, rather than as a formal part of program structure. In at least one traditional YAL site, the focus was almost entirely on the transition to HSE.

Component three: A variety of support services including career counseling with transition support

Implementation ratings

Implementation of integrated transition support was generally high across Bridge sites. Traditional YAL sites also demonstrated moderate to high implementation of this component. Exhibit 5 below summarizes the implementation ratings for this component for the Bridge and traditional sites.

Exhibit 5. Implementation Ratings for Component Three, by Treatment Status

Treatment Status	Mean	Number of sites implementing at each level			
		No implementation	Low	Moderate	High
Bridge sites (n=7)[1]	4.7	0	0	1	6
Traditional YAL sites (n=8)	3.9	0	1	3	4

Note: Three items were rated for support services, and the sum of these ratings was used to develop an overall implementation rating for this component on following scale: 0=no implementation, 1-2= low implementation, 3-4=moderate implementation, 5=high implementation. Means are based on the overall implementation rating. A copy of the rating instrument is in Attachment A.
[1] Excluding the treatment site that declined to implement Bridge, the mean for Bridge sites changes slightly but still rounds to 4.7.

Synopsis of approaches used at Bridge sites

The transition support offered by sites varied based on site partnerships and resources, particularly staffing resources. Transition supports were provided by a variety of staff including the program director, social worker, case managers, Master of Social Work (MSW) interns, and youth advocates. Several sites discussed the value of dedicated staff for different needs including recruitment, case management, and instruction. One Bridge site director said,

> [N]ow that we have MSW interns, we have been having a weekly social support team meeting…which our counseling specialist is running. She's doing a really good job.

Bridge sites often provided some combination of education, career, and social support that take place through a variety of channels. They included one-on-one counseling sessions, group counseling or support groups, and incorporation of life skills, job skills, or social emotional learning into the curriculum. "The case managers do individual counseling sessions…as well as group facilitation." At one site, a staff member runs workshops about "issues that may be happening in their personal lives, in their neighborhoods, or even in the classroom… [to] get an understanding of what the participants' needs are, provide action plans."

Education support and transition support across Bridge sites included tutoring, access to pre-college prep courses, formalized relationships with HSE providers, college advising, counseling for test anxiety, and assistance with Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) logistics. At one Bridge site the program director discussed the importance of finding the right next step for participants, particularly when they have progressed beyond what the YAL site could offer them academically.

> We just established a little pathway. We realized that where there is a little bit of a seamless pathway, students are more apt to stay on it.

As discussed previously under component two, career-focused support included a focus on soft skills job training, internships, career counseling, and resume writing workshops. In at least one site, an external partner provided wrap-around career development support from pre-interview skills to planned post-interview follow-up. Similarly, another program director discussed efforts to keep in touch with participants after they transition, particularly if the participant was in need of additional assistance.

> We try to keep track of them as much as we can…a lot of times they are coming and knocking on our doors before we can even get to do that.

Social supports were a common offering across sites and include financial counseling, sexual health counseling, childcare, and assistance finding transitional housing opportunities. For example, one Bridge site program director said,

I'm regularly getting emails about transitional housing opportunities whenever they have open beds, which is huge because it's really hard to find open beds in any kind of housing program in New York.

Comparison of Bridge to traditional YAL

The overall implementation of this component was slightly lower at the traditional YAL sites compared to the Bridge sites. Common across both groups was the strong social support offered by sites including mental health referrals, case managers, group counseling, and access to periodic life or job skills workshops. Both the traditional YAL sites and Bridge sites had many of the same types of personnel offering support or mentoring to participants.

While the social support services provided were common across both groups, the career counseling was an added feature of Bridge sites, as expected. Most traditional YAL sites had partnerships for HSE transition and support built in, and a few also include partnerships for career-focused transition. However, in general, these career-focused transitional supports were described as more formalized in Bridge sites, especially through the provision of dedicated career counseling. In at least one traditional YAL site, career transition services were available to participants if they asked, but the uptake on those opportunities appears relatively low.

B.   Contextual Factors That Affect Implementation

In this section, we discuss the contextual factors that helped and hindered program implementation. The focus is on Bridge sites, but factors identified in traditional YAL sites are also discussed for comparison. The first part of this section presents factors that affected the implementation of the three core Bridge components. The second section describes the role of technical assistance as a strong facilitating factor, followed by additional factors that helped or hindered implementation of program elements.

> **Key Findings for evaluation question two:** *What factors help and hinder the implementation of the three core Bridge components? Are there any other factors, including provision of technical assistance, which help or hinder Bridge sites?*
>
> **Factors Affecting Implementation of the Three Bridge Components**
>
> - Implementation of sector-specific contextualized instruction in Bridge sites was limited by stakeholders' understanding of this program component.
>
> - The extent to which staff in Bridge sites felt they were able to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their students influenced use of the curriculum.
>
> - Staffing is an essential factor that facilitated all three components but especially the development of bridge partnerships and the provision of supports.

Factors affecting implementation of the three Bridge program components in Bridge sites

Contextualized instruction and the Bridge curriculum

Understanding of contextualized instruction emerged as a hindering factor across the Bridge sites. In one site, for example, an instructor had difficulty understanding how to integrate contextualized material into the classroom, and the program director indicated that contextualized instruction had been the most challenging aspect of the program to implement. In at least three sites, program staff understood contextualized instruction in broader terms than the sector-focused definition used in the Bridge curriculum, which resulted in a more general theme-based approach that did not always connect to specific career paths. Furthermore, staff in nearly all Bridge sites tended to reference the Bridge curriculum as a whole when discussing how they used contextualized instruction, suggesting that many have difficulty separating the two. Taken together, these findings suggested a need for additional training and implementation support for contextualized instruction, a request voiced by staff in two Bridge sites.

Use of the curriculum depended in part on staff's ability to adapt it to their own needs.
Program staff differed in the extent to which they believed the curriculum was flexibly designed. According to some, the flexibility of the curriculum was an asset and the lack of expectations helped sites "implement other things that [they] believe are important for participants to understand." According to others, however, the curriculum lacked flexibility, which was a hindrance to adaptability. For these staff, the difficulty in tailoring the curriculum to the educational level of their participants made the curriculum either too difficult or too easy, depending on the population served. For example,

at sites where the population served was working toward enrolling into a HSE course, the curriculum may have been on target. However, according to one program director, it was less applicable when participants were aiming to immediately take the TASC exam after completing the YAL program cycle.

Staff experience was also identified as an important factor. According to one program director, new instructors were better suited to the Bridge program because they could be trained in the curriculum from the beginning and would therefore be better equipped to use the WPTI curriculum it its entirety. Consultants from CUNY CAT shared a similar opinion, that is, a value of the curriculum was to "ground" new or lower quality teachers who might not be able to create engaging lessons on their own. In contrast, experienced "veteran" teachers were described as having difficulty adapting the curriculum to their sites and merging it with their existing teaching practices and lessons.

Another factor was the number of program cycles attended by a site's participants. At more than one site, participants attended multiple cycles of the YAL program while the curriculum was described as being designed for one cycle only. One program director explained, for example, how it was difficult to keep reusing the lessons while keeping participants engaged:

> *We use it [Bridge curriculum] throughout the year, but if you've got kids that are coming back, they're learning the same thing over again. The kids are here, essentially, for the entire year. They're here for four cycles, right? Some of them need more than the four cycles, so they'll roll over into the following year. If they did the lesson already, they're relearning the same thing. We're trying to adapt it as much as possible, so that they're not bored and that they don't leave.*

Establishing "bridges" to HSE and other programs through partnerships

The most important factor that facilitated strong bridges between YAL sites and bridge destinations (e.g., HSE providers and internship opportunities in Bridge sites) was having program staff dedicated to identifying and cultivating partnerships. Program staff acknowledged that developing effective partnerships, for both internship sites and HSE providers, is an intensive process that requires ongoing and active involvement. For instance, one program reported that it has established clear lines of communication with HSE providers and checks in "at least quarterly" with the HSE providers with whom it works. Another site reported making visits to partner HSE programs to check the quality of services provided. As a result, the presence of staff that can focus on this work either primarily or as part of their broader responsibilities was a key facilitating factor. Arrangements at sites included a staff member who was specifically responsible for developing internship opportunities for youth and the creation of a placement specialist position responsible for internship placements, the development of partnerships, and matching youth to opportunities. A dedicated position also allowed the site to be more deliberate about placements. As described by the program director,

> *We had to allow time to get to know the students prior to placing them into an internship site. Front loading the job readiness across the first two weeks of class gave the Placement Specialist*

some time to monitor and observe students' behaviors and things like that prior to sending them out on an internship placement.

Furthermore, this staff member was also impassioned about this work, which was highlighted as another supporting factor. According to the program director,

[The placement specialist] is really gung-ho about finding placements that students are interested in. That is paramount to his work…I think it really does make a difference for a lot of students.

The strength of the bridge partnerships was also affected by the readiness and commitment of the participants themselves. Sites faced several challenges when trying to place participants at internships. One site, for example, described difficulty getting participants to commit to their internship assignments and attend consistently, which further discourages partner organizations from taking additional placements or working with the program. The short program cycle further exacerbated this challenge since even a committed participant will only be placed at an internship site for a relatively short period of time. These hindering factors were explained by one program director in the following way:

The amount of time that it takes for the Placement Specialist to cultivate these relationships externally, with host sites, for them to only turn around and get 9 weeks of work from the internships, it sometimes might not look so enticing for employers to sign on, especially given the nature of the population that we service. They can be inconsistent at times, and so how do you still maintain that relationship with the employer that has their bottom line… and we're asking them to take on these interns who may or may not show up.

Another site attempted to address these issues through job readiness training, wherein the "basics" are emphasized with participants, thereby better preparing them for their next experiences. According to one interviewed staff member, these include:

Job training, situational judgment, job search, general job search. It's really to help them advocate for themselves in the workforce. These kids haven't worked. They haven't been in school. We're kind of going back to basics on all of these different levels.

Partnerships came from leveraging of internal partnerships and forming external partnerships, and these relationships shaped the types of pathways a site could provide. At one site, the relationship with the staff at the library in which they are housed served as a conduit to the community, especially given that the library is often viewed as a source of information regarding community resources. However, this site was also limited with respect to forming external partnerships as a function of being somewhat geographically isolated. In several sites, having an internal HSE program was noted as an important way to smooth the transition for participants. For sites in the process of cultivating external partnerships, the quality and continuity offered by these programs was essential, as explained by a program director:

> *Partnerships are really about building relationships, so I am not just picking up the want ads…I am really vetting the program, making sure their goals and outcomes align with what we are trying to do.*

Furthermore, participants were faced with competing opportunities, which could result in their declining to take advantage of even well-constructed bridge partnerships. Participants might be otherwise employed or may believe that the internship opportunities do not offer enough hours or pay to be a worthwhile choice.

One factor affecting student utilization of HSE pathways was the reluctance of some participants to move on to less participant-centered environments. Participants leaving a very supportive YAL program for a more hands-off HSE program could feel frustrated with the new program. Program directors at multiple sites highlighted the transition from a supportive environment as a challenge to utilization of the HSE pathways.

> *[Participants] enjoy YAL, so everything that comes with YAL…the small community, the snack, the camaraderie, the attention and often a number of HSE programs take place in bigger systems such as CUNY or a bigger program where they may not feel the same touch. They're sort of taken care of here so they don't want to go.*

Providing transition support

The availability of dedicated staff members who were able to provide strong social, academic, and employment supports was a key factor influencing implementation of the third program component. Those interviewed cited insufficient staffing as the major hindering factor, while program directors at several sites described the importance of having dedicated positions. Examples of dedicated staff positions included a licensed social worker and a case manager. At one site, a team of staff, including a licensed social worker, a college counselor, and a case manager, provided the support services. To the extent that YAL program sites were able to leverage the resources of the provider organizations (e.g., CBO or library hosting the YAL program site), being part of a larger organization was also a helpful factor. These sites were able to tap into staff from other programs to support their own work and were also able to share counselors and support services. Smaller sites without these opportunities faced more of a challenge.

Role of technical assistance in facilitating implementation

Both Bridge and traditional YAL program sites were generally receiving the same technical assistance from CUNY CAT and DYCD. Across the YAL programs, sites described participating in Young Adult Literacy provider meetings, DYCD-sponsored trainings, and a comprehensive series of workshops and site visits by CUNY CAT. In addition, at both Bridge and traditional sites, the program directors described providing their staff with additional training either conducted by themselves or through third-party

trainers such as the Literacy Assistance Center. Staff across multiple sites also attended position- or content-specific workshops on a variety of topics including career training, mental health, anti-racism, and the provision of social support. Overall, YAL program sites were using technical assistance primarily to

- learn about the curriculum,

- enhance their core programming,

- learn additional complementary skills (e.g., anti-racism, social supports), and

- provide direct service to participants.

Staff at both Bridge and traditional sites identified the importance of cross-site events hosted by both DYCD and CUNY CAT. Staff appreciated these cross-site gatherings for the peer learning that took place and the opportunity to build a community of providers. This experience was considered to be both unique and valuable. One program director explained:

> *What I appreciate about them is that they're very particular about how they engage all the programs together. That hadn't been my experience before….Yesterday all sites went to the movies together. That I wasn't used to with other contracts or other programs of the whole. I never really had experience with the TA provider or the contract manager that brought everyone together.*

The technical assistance provided by CUNY CAT was particularly well-received. Those interviewed described the support from CUNY CAT favorably and particularly emphasized the site visits that were conducted—the combination of one-on-one consultations and observation—and the frequency of communication. Program directors also consistently praised CUNY CAT's staff developer and her responsiveness to ad-hoc requests, her flexibility, and her willingness to provide direct services to participants (for example, the staff developer introduced service learning to participants, conducted a movie screening, and facilitated "talkbacks" during visits). In fact, feedback from program staff indicates that the extent to which CUNY CAT's technical assistance was appreciated may be due, in no small part, to the skills of this single individual. As stated by one interviewed staff member:

> *The TA sessions are very helpful, only because number one, [the staff developer] and CUNY CAT has been working with their own YAL program for a number of years now, since its inception and its roll out. They're very familiar with the sites. They have intimate knowledge of sites' level of needs. They provide a technical assistance targeting those particular needs. If it's around curriculum development, if it's around case management, if it's around social emotional support, if it's around the service learning initiative. Over the course of a calendar year, they'll provide a technical assistance training for each of the program areas.*

Against the backdrop of the shared technical assistance, Bridge sites also received support from WPTI. According to those interviewed, WPTI's role was primarily to facilitate the provision of the curriculum by providing the curriculum itself and training staff on how to implement each element of the Bridge approach. With WPTI's help, program staff were encouraged to think strategically about the program model. Regarding transition support, for example, one program director described how WPTI helped them:

> …think through how to refer students, like what are our reasons for referring a student to a particular program and have we thought about the distance and how students would feel in the program and how do we make contact when the new cycle begins.

Other factors

Factors affecting recruitment, enrollment, and retention

Positive community awareness of the YAL programs was a helping factor across both traditional and Bridge programs. Sites benefited when they were known in the community and further benefited when they were able to turn this positive awareness into stable ongoing recruitment pathways. At one site, for example, their work was known by guidance counselors at local schools who make referrals each year, as appropriate. At another site, a local CBO knew their work and made community referrals. Sites also benefited from partnerships with other city-funded programs. One site, for example, received referrals from a NYC Department of Probation Neighborhood Opportunity Network (NeON) program as well as a local NYC Department of Education adult education hub.

The availability of staff to focus on recruitment and enrollment was another helping factor across sites. The importance of this factor was most apparent in its absence. Staffing shortages at YAL programs limited the intensity and timing of recruitment. For example, staff at one site were only able to recruit immediately before each cycle begins instead of over the full course of the year since they could not spare an instructional staff member for this duty. A Bridge site that had the opportunity to hire a dedicated recruitment coordinator provides an example of the opposite extreme. Having a dedicated position also allows for a more consistent enrollment procedure:

> We found that to actually be really beneficial, because we have so many participants, or potential participants, coming in to do intakes, interviews and calling, for both programs. Because there's so many staff members that were handling all the different phone calls, and because of the inconsistency of that type of population, a lot of the intakes that were coming in were not actually coming in to attend class, or we weren't able to get all their paperwork to enroll them into the program.

A significant hindrance for YAL programs was competition from non-YAL programs and other agencies in the community that serve the same population at the same time. Multiple program directors indicated that it could be difficult to recruit participants when other nearby organizations do similar

work. Therefore, while being located in a community rich with organizations is helpful for building partnerships, it created a challenge when trying to enroll participants. As one program director explains,

> [My site] does have a lot of other programs within the neighborhood. The issue [here] is the competitiveness. There's many other pre-HSE programs inside of that area. That's why we struggle to get our numbers, because we're competing amongst several other youth programs that service students of the same age.

Other factors helping or hindering implementation of the program

The most important additional factor that affected a site's implementation of the YAL program was the extent to which it was able to benefit from the resources and services of the library or community- based organization that hosted the Young Adult Literacy program. This ability to benefit was found to vary considerably across sites. At some sites, the YAL program was described as being enmeshed within the organization's array of youth services. At these sites, the YAL program benefited from shared resources and staffing such as access to social workers and transition counselors. In addition, some YAL programs benefited tremendously from the ability to refer participants to in-house HSE programs and the ability to place participants at internships within their own organization. These benefits accrued almost equally to both Bridge and traditional sites, although two of the traditional sites were also able to benefit from a curriculum developed and provided by their host organization.

C.   Strategies Found at Bridge and Traditional Sites

In this section, we present high-level strategies that were used by Bridge and traditional sites to enhance their services. The strategies presented are those that cut across multiple program elements such as participant recruitment and retention, classroom instruction, and transition planning and have been identified as approaches utilized across multiple sites.

> **Key Findings for evaluation question three**: *What strategies, if any, are being used in successful Bridge programs? In successful traditional YAL sites?*

- There were no systematic differences in the strategies being used by Bridge sites and the strategies being used by traditional sites. The Bridge model generally did not provide any strategies that were not already present at traditional sites.

- Key strategies used in both Bridge and traditional sites to strengthen their programs included:

    o focusing on the social and emotional needs of participants;

    o actively varied engagement with participants over the course of the program;

    o soliciting youth input to adjust program elements;

    o program flexibility and differentiation according to participant needs; and

    o cultivating a community of participants and staff.

Overall strategies used across program elements

Overall, no systematic differences were identified in the strategies enacted by Bridge and traditional sites to further their implementation of the Young Adult Literacy program. Strategies were generally found to be site specific, with staff, program directors, and observers identifying different key strategies at each location. While several common strategies did emerge, they did not correspond with whether or not a site was implementing the Bridge program. This was a largely expected finding and one that supports the randomized control trial design, as the Bridge model itself did not necessarily provide deeper strategies beyond the model's three prescribed components and the provision of a curriculum. As presented in the prior section, a more influential factor was the provider's organizational attributes: the extent to which the CBO or library's staffing, resources, and services could be shared with the YAL program.

Several common strategies were described as benefiting multiple elements of the Young Adult Literacy model; these ranged from participant retention and participation to classroom instruction and transition support. These strategies include:

- **Focusing on the social and emotional needs of the participants.** Attending to the social and emotional needs of participants was described by program directors and instructors as being important across multiple contexts. Program staff recognized that for the YAL program to be successful, participants needed encouragement to stay motivated. In addition, program staff recognized that participants enter the program facing considerable challenges at home and in

their personal lives that, unless recognized and addressed, can negatively impact their ability to benefit from participation in the program. This sentiment was captured by one program director, who explained:

> *These [participants] come from different walks of life. A lot of them are still hurting, still going through that drama. We have to approach them in a way that we can't be condescending. There's a reason why they got kicked out of high school, you know? So, I always reiterate the fact that we have to keep them encouraged and keep them motivated.*

This strategy of focusing on the social and emotional needs manifested differently depending on program element and stage of the program cycle. At one site, for example, the program director made sure to check in with participants each morning to gauge their emotional state so that staff can respond appropriately. This was described as important because "sometimes they could walk in and you can tell they have a lot on their shoulders," and therefore staff must be "more mindful of how they are when they come in." Another site went further and kept the daily schedule flexible, arranging the order of the sessions depending on the participants' moods. Here, it was shared that:

> *Sometimes, we may stop with numeracy and finish with literacy depending on the energy of the students that day. Although they don't like math, they're a little bit more enthused when the math is happening because they're eager to learn…Sometimes you have to just utilize your judgment that day and see how they're doing. You may have this curriculum in front of you that you're following, but because of the population of the students that we deal with, it can vary from day to day.*

To allow for this focus on social and emotional needs, program staff need to be made aware of its importance and need to feel empowered to address participant needs within the classroom. As one program director stated, for this to be accomplished effectively,

> *Some of the teachers have to be a little bit more mindful of the barriers that may be affecting them, and allowing the teacher to be more supportive of their feelings while teaching. [Teachers should] look for certain cues to understand if the student is disengaged at that day.*

This strategy was also enacted through supplementing staffing. One program site, for example, creatively addressed a staffing shortage in this area by bringing in MSW interns as volunteers.

- **Actively engaging with participants over the course of the program.** Program staff at multiple sites described actively engaging with participants in multiple ways. Engagement took place through communication with participants as well as at events and celebrations. Program staff described actively engaging with participants at different points within the program cycle for the

purposes of increasing participant attendance and retention as well as cultivating a program culture among participants and staff. One strategy used by staff across sites to enhance their participant engagement was the use of social media and text messaging. Sites also communicated with participants through telephone calls, written letters, and face-to-face check-ins. They also deliberately provided regular positive feedback. This form of engagement was considered especially helpful at increasing participant attendance. As explained by one program director,

> We tend to send out "You Are Awesome cards." Staff tend to give them to students to say, "You're awesome. You're great. Keep up the good attendance." We definitely do utilize technology a lot, in sending text messages to students to say, "Hey, great attendance this week." Or, "You've been absent. We miss you!"

A more unique strategy was the creation of networks of accountability among peers. At one site, for example, participants were paired and asked to check on their "buddy" each day and call them if they were not in class. According to the program director, "they're responsible for each other."

Finally, participant engagement also manifested through celebrations, such as those that take place at one site that provided regular breakfast for participants that have met the cycle's attendance goal (e.g., 90 or 100 percent attendance).

- **Soliciting participant input to adjust program elements.** Another identified strategy across Bridge and traditional sites was to solicit participant input and adjust implementation accordingly. The overarching purpose of this approach was to use the program's flexibility to cultivate participant buy-in. One program director described it as a means of aligning participant and program goals as much as possible in order to develop a more authentic experience. Concrete applications of this strategy included the incorporation of participant input into instructional topics. As explained by one program staff member, "I'm starting to see less teaching and more facilitation….letting young people be in charge of their classroom and [letting] discussions happen, rich discussions." At another (traditional) site, participants were given the opportunity to guide their own service learning projects (in contrast to other sites where staff choose the projects).

- **Offering a flexible program according to participant needs.** Program staff acknowledged that participants start the program with varying degrees of knowledge and different backgrounds. Both Bridge and traditional sites addressed the variation within their programs by differentiating their instruction and responding flexibly to individual needs. For example, one site worked diligently to help participants who must miss class by making math, science, and social studies lessons available online. The program director monitored participants' progress to ensure that they stay on track. According to the program director at this site, this flexibility is consistent with the priority to "get them to the [TASC] exam, [and help them] pass that exam, even if they are

not in the classroom." Other sites differentiated their support through one-on-one tutoring, personal support during instructional lessons, and tailored homework assignments. One traditional site applied this flexibility to enrollment, allowing participants who were unable to complete their current cycle an opportunity to re-enroll in a later cycle.

> *We do have a system where we allow every young adult one opportunity to come back to the program. Let's say if you came in this cycle, you were absent every single day and we're like, "Maybe this is not the right cycle for you. You are able to take a leave of absence and address whatever's going on at home or in your own life and then come back for consideration." That's been helpful.*

- **Cultivating a community of participants and staff.** The development of a supportive community and culture was identified as another prevalent strategy among the YAL programs. Following this strategy was described as leading to increased participant retention as well as enhanced academic learning, since it results in cohorts where participants volunteer to help one another in and out of the classroom. Several ways of creating a shared community were identified. The first was through the insertion of an orientation boot camp at the start of the program cycle. One site used this to introduce a uniform set of instructional and program expectations shared by all participants.

Building upon this, programs worked hard to address participants' social and emotional needs, involve them in decision making, and celebrate success. These steps further worked to build community among participants and staff. According to one program director, the development of a positive participant culture has:

> *…to do with the culture of the place, and that it feels welcoming. It feels clean, inviting, and bright. That people care about you. That you look forward to things you might do there: doing birthday celebrations, different ways to acknowledge students.*

Finally, another identified strategy was placing a limit on participant enrollment to promote an intimate and supportive environment

> *Once we set a community environment in here, [participants] sort of play off each other. They're motivating towards one another, which keeps them persistent with the program. We maintain small cohorts, so I think that's also enticing to young people that they're known and can be seen.*

Additional innovative strategies

Additional innovative strategies used to enhance particular elements of the YAL program included the following:

- **Using participants to assist with recruitment.** Several sites added to their outreach efforts by encouraging active participants to recruit their peers for the program. Participants who successfully referred another youth who subsequently completed the required number of program hours were rewarded with an incentive.

- **Class tardiness managed in a standard manner that includes social support.** Program staff shared the importance of treating class tardiness as a signal of other challenges that a participant may be facing. At one site, tardiness for three consecutive days "triggers a case conference between the teacher and their counselor to be able to address their lateness."

- **Thematic instruction.[5]** At more than one site, instruction was embedded within broader themes, for example, literacy taught through social studies. Another example was encouraging individual teachers to build themes around "what their passions are" as long as it also aligns with the program's goals.

- **Ongoing management of expectations.** One site managed participant expectations at the start of the cycle, letting incoming participants know that most students attend for two or three cycles. This increases retention by presenting a realistic understanding of the experience. At a different site, program staff provided transition counseling near the beginning of the cycle to reduce the abruptness of the transition when it does take place. In another site, the need to manage participant expectations for attaining HSE directly through the program was important, as many students arrive with the expectation that they will leave having completed HSE, even if they may not be sufficiently prepared to take the TASC exam:

  You don't want to discourage them. We'll talk about like, "OK. How are you going to feel if you don't pass? What are you going to do? What's the game plan? Are you doing this because you think you're going to pass or are you doing this because you want to do a practice right now and see where you're at?

Three strategies were identified for successfully engaging with external partner organizations in support of providing effective internship placements at Bridge sites and in support of effective transitions from the YAL program:

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[5] While thematic instruction alone does not meet the formal Bridge program definition of contextualized instruction—since it does not relate to careers or employment nor does it necessarily include applied skills—it is consistent with other definitions of contextualized instruction in the field and with the way in which program staff at some sites understand this concept.

- **Active monitoring of internship placements.** At one site, the program director described the importance of carefully assessing each internship site: "We evaluate the sites. We evaluate our participants' work. We do unannounced site visits. Just to see [what's going on]."

- **Ongoing communication with external partners supported by sufficient staff bandwidth.** Program staff at multiple sites emphasized the importance of actively managing their relationships with external partners, primarily through ongoing communication. This strategy applied to Bridge partners as well as those organizations receiving interns and requires sufficient staff resources, as several program directors mentioned. A case manager was critical in managing one site's relationships. At another, the program director took responsibility and described the role as, "Just making connections, doing the outreach, making sure that it's something that will be beneficial for both parties being able to just articulate what the needs are and how the collaboration, again, will be beneficial for both parties."

- **Using external and internal partners to support to participants transitioning to HSE programs.** At both Bridge and traditional YAL program sites, participants received transition support from external partners, including career counseling. At one site, a local college made a series of visits to the YAL program to support participants' subsequent enrollment in the college's HSE program, getting to know participants before they left the YAL program to provide a smoother transition.

D.   Stakeholders' Perspectives of the Bridge and Traditional YAL Programs

In this section we present the perspective of program staff, participants, and technical assistance providers regarding the value of the Bridge program, as well as suggestions for its improvement.

Key Findings for evaluation question four: *To what degree do various stakeholders perceive the Bridge addition to the YAL program to be successful? How can the Bridge program be improved?*

- Bridge program directors and instructors (especially new instructors) appreciated both the structure provided by the Bridge curriculum as well as the flexibility they felt they have to adapt it.

- Bridge participants were positive about their experience in the program and mentioned improved academic skills and relationships with staff as what they liked most. Program directors, however, had not seen changes in participant attendance or outcomes since adopting Bridge.

- Program directors appreciated the technical assistance provided by both CUNY CAT and WPTI, but several Bridge program directors felt overwhelmed by the pace and scale of implementation and training requirements.

- Some Bridge sites felt that the focus on contextualized instruction in the curriculum should be expanded to cover more learning activities and broaden the range of career fields explored.

- Implementation of contextualized instruction and strategies for enhancing internships were highlighted by Bridge sites as areas in which additional technical assistance support would be useful.

Stakeholder perceptions of the Bridge program's value

Enhanced structure and resources

Program directors and instructors (especially new instructors) appreciated both the structure provided by the Bridge curriculum as well as the flexibility they feel they have to adapt it. Instructors found the content and structure of the Bridge curriculum useful, especially new instructors and other staff who temporarily stepped in to teach in response to last minute staffing vacancies. One program director cited the contextualized aspect as a plus of the Bridge curriculum:

> *The difference is that it's [the curriculum] contextualized and I like that idea because it gives students a more realistic view of what they're reading and writing for….. It's a good way to teach students how to think… Giving them scenarios and how they can use these transferable skills in real time and in tangible ways.*

Bridge programs had more resources to focus on the transition to HSE programs and had to shift, according to WPTI staff, from thinking the goal is raising participants to the ninth-grade level to actually getting them into an HSE-prep class. That is a big change and "a lot harder."

Within this context, WPTI staff were hopeful that the Bridge enhancements could increase participants' motivation to participate and successfully transition to HSE. WPTI staff felt the combination of participant-centered, contextualized instruction combined with an internship would successfully motivate participants to follow through with transitioning to a HSE program.

It all goes together. Somebody's going to work harder on their math learning their times tables if they have a goal that's more sanguine than "I want to get my GED." Instead, "I'm going to be this, this is my plan." [It gives participants] Internal motivation.

Program staff at Bridge sites expressed support for the mission of preparing students to enter an HSE-preparation program but, as previously noted, described the nature of partnering with HSE providers as an intensive, ongoing process, particularly those not based within the providing organization.

Value of work-readiness opportunities and partnerships

Internships and career readiness workshops were valued for preparing participants for the world of work. Developing internship opportunities was one of several new components, but several sites (especially those experiencing more difficulty implementing the contextualized instruction) indicated placing participants in internships was the main difference between the Bridge and the traditional YAL sites. Internships provided valuable experiences and skills that could not be gained in the classroom. One program director commented on how an internship "satisfies something of immediate need for a lot of the participants. They do enjoy getting their pay cards and their language changes in being able to reflect on things they did well…" In addition, a few of the sites reported that since becoming a Bridge site they increased the emphasis or focus on career planning for Bridge participants by providing "more individualized attention for career readiness" such as help with resumes and preparing for job interviews.

While internships seemed to be generally valued in Bridge sites, some stakeholders expressed mixed opinions about the wages offered through internship participation. In a few sites, participants made comparisons between the internships offered in Bridge and service learning projects in traditional YAL sites, including the way in which students were paid under these different approaches. For example, a program director who oversees both Bridge and traditional YAL indicated that the internship was the main way the site distinguished the two programs in its outreach to potential students. Specifically, the site highlighted the difference between wages in Bridge versus stipends in traditional YAL:

We mainly talk about the differences in the pay, the wage versus the stipend with service learning. That's probably the main distinguishing factor… just to make it easier for students to understand.

In this site, it was noted that the difference between wages and stipends was meaningful to students because tax could be deducted from wages, making the internship less attractive. In other sites, internship wages were viewed by students and staff as not competitive with what students could earn through part-time jobs. As one program director noted, low pay and potential loss of benefits were two reasons some students were reluctant to participate in internships:

Some students feel like they can make more money on a regular job, so you compete with that. Also, the minimum wage, they don't really care for. For certain students who ware receiving benefits, it's not worth the risk. If they run the potential of having other benefits reduced or cut off, it's not enticing.

According to program staff, participants' needs were met through partnerships with external and internal social service providers. Through these partnerships sites provided a variety of support services, including career counseling, college counseling, referrals to health services, and help with personal or family issues. While these partnerships predated the introduction of the Bridge model, they were nevertheless highly appreciated.

Support from technical assistance providers[6]

Program directors appreciated the professional development provided by both the CUNY CAT and WPTI, but several felt overwhelmed by the pace and scale of implementation and training requirements. Program directors were positive overall about adding Bridge to their programs and they appreciated the professional development provided by both CUNY CAT and WPTI. At the same time, many Bridge directors described feeling overwhelmed with multiple commitments, priorities, and resources to incorporate into their programs, and a lack of time to process all of the information. Some directors felt the program required too much time away from the office (or classroom) for meetings with technical assistance providers, especially for sites located further away with long travel times.

The partnerships and cross-site gatherings among all 15 YAL sites, an effort led and nurtured by CUNY CAT, was described as particularly successful in removing the sense of competition between sites and creating exciting programs. CUNY CAT devoted significant effort to helping sites cooperate, develop cross-site events, and create a more collaborative environment. On CUNY CAT's efforts, one program director said, "it removed the sense of competition. It's like, 'we're here. We're all in this same mission. We're doing the same work.' And bringing uniformity to the work that we do."

Participant viewpoints on achieving their goals

All participants expected the program would help them meet their goal of getting their HSE diploma. Participants in the focus groups appreciated that the program helped them improve their academic skills (primarily math and reading). Overall, feedback indicated that participants assumed that through the program they will be able to pass the necessary exams to receive a high school equivalency diploma— there was a very high level of confidence demonstrated by those participating in the focus groups regarding this outcome. Bridge program directors indicated that they had not yet observed changes in participant attendance or HSE outcomes that could be linked to the new program, although none had performed a detailed analysis of data to assess this conclusion.

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[6] Described further in section B of the report, *Contextual Factors That Affect Implementation*.

Participants, in agreement with staff, enjoyed positive relationships with program staff members. One participant remarked, "What I really like about this program is that everybody is like a family, you can always count on somebody if you're feeling down. You can always come to somebody here and you can always count on them to be there."

Stakeholder feedback on how to improve the Bridge program

Improvements to the Bridge Curriculum

Expand the scope of contextualized instruction within the curriculum. Some program staff felt that contextualized instruction should be incorporated more widely throughout the academic lessons so that all lessons tie in to healthcare or IT. Indeed, in a focus group, WPTI staff noted that the curriculum contains reading and math lessons that are not contextualized. In addition, the curriculum builds participants' reading and writing skills through sustained silent reading and frequent writing exercises that do not pertain to healthcare or IT. It is also worth noting that program staff in several Bridge sites felt the focus on just two career fields was too limited and should be expanded to address other areas that may be of interest to program participants.

Other suggestions from program directors for improving the Bridge curriculum include the following:

- One program director noted that participants often remain in the program for more than two cycles, so that the curriculum needs to be expanded or the material will become repetitive.

- Incorporate assessments of participant strengths, weaknesses, and improvements (beyond measuring increases in TABE scores).

- Increase the attention to social and emotional learning.

Improvements to Internships

In terms of improving the internship component, one director and internship coordinator suggested that increasing the length of the cycle might entice more employers to hire interns and increase the value for both employers and participants. Participants interned for nine to 12 weeks, which was not long enough for employers to feel the need to properly invest in and train interns.[7]

> *Employers aren't interested in taking up to maximum 10 hours per week to train someone who's only going to be there maximum a month, 12 weeks in a year. The only real internships I've been*

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[7] Although the site providing this quote indicated that internships may last up to 12 weeks, the Bridge program specifies a maximum 10 week duration for internships.

able to arrange are with organizations that already have a volunteer structure. Most of my students are "volunteering." We do have them volunteering in a for-profit retail company, Burlington, but there aren't the same expectations that would be there from a part-time worker or even a college intern. Their dependability isn't really tested there or developed.

Participants also suggested expanding the types of internships to areas that align with their career interests.

For instance, if you want to be a police. It would be a great feeling to know, if there was an internship with the police … it's better for him because he gets more experience and then you never know.

Some participants expressed the difficulty of fitting internships into their own work schedules. They wished the program allowed them to work more hours at the internship or offered a more flexible internship schedule. Participants appreciated having MetroCards for getting to the program but requested transit passes for the internship.

Improvements to Technical Assistance

Some instructors experienced difficulty incorporating the curriculum and needed additional training around contextualized instruction. Program directors in a few sites noted that instructors had some difficulty using the new curriculum, particularly if the instructors wanted to adapt the program to existing classroom routines, suggesting a need for additional implementation support in this area. For instance, some instructors requested additional support in learning how to differentiate and customize the material (especially referring to math lessons) to make it more or less challenging depending on participants' abilities.

Program directors were particularly interested in technical assistance around building external internships, increasing the number of internships in healthcare and IT sectors, and finding internships aligned with participants' interests. One program director said they had difficulty enticing employers to take on participants, especially given participants' tendency to be unreliable, and expressed an interest in exploring options within the provider's organization. Another noted a difficulty finding internships for participants with past criminal justice involvement as well as paying for the cost of fingerprinting and other needs associated with obtaining internships for this population. One project director found participants were less interested in work readiness than the academic aspects and believed that participants did not see the connections between these Bridge components.

Conclusion and Implications

Taken together, the implementation study data suggested that the Bridge program had begun to take hold in the sites that were selected to implement it, but some program aspects had stronger implementation than others. Use of the Bridge curriculum was apparent in nearly all sites, and evidence of contextualized instruction was also seen although at low levels. In several Bridge sites, the meaning of contextualized instruction was found to be understood more broadly than the "sector-focused" definition used in Bridge, and stakeholders could not clearly distinguish contextualized instruction from the larger Bridge curriculum. The Bridge sites took steps to establish new or reinforce existing pathways ("bridges") that provide opportunities for participants to gain entry to more advanced education and careers. The sites offered a range of social and academic supports to help participants achieve their educational and career goals.

As implemented, the Bridge model had both differences and similarities to the traditional YAL approach. Use of sector-specific contextualized instruction was found to be among the most notable differences between Bridge and traditional YAL sites, even given the Bridge sites' low level of contextualized instruction implementation. Both Bridge and traditional YAL sites established pathways to facilitate transition to education programs and careers, although Bridge sites were found to be developing more formalized career pathways, including robust partnerships with external organizations. Both Bridge and traditional YAL sites tended to offer participants strong support services that were aimed at facilitating transitions, although career counseling appeared to be a notable strength among Bridge sites. Such similarities led the evaluation team to recommend a revised approach to the impact study, described in more detail below.

Bridge sites made modifications to the Bridge model, although these appeared to be mostly consistent with guidance on adaptation from WPTI. Several Bridge sites made adaptations to the Bridge model, including selecting portions of the curriculum to use or supplementing the curriculum with new material. In some cases, this was in response to perceived shortcomings of the curriculum, such as a limiting focus on two job sectors (healthcare and information technology), that may not have relevance to all participants. Indeed, some stakeholders indicated that the perceived flexibility of the model was an asset, allowing for tailored implementation that best meets the needs of participants. However, others viewed the program as difficult to adapt to existing practices, with some expressing concern that the content was either too simple or too advanced for the participant population. The ability to adapt a program to participants' needs and circumstances was identified as a key best practice in both Bridge and traditional YAL sites, suggesting that some sites could benefit from additional guidance or support in making the program work well for their young people.

The implementation study highlighted the importance of building a strong program staff and leveraging site-based resources. Again and again, program staff were cited as a crucial resource, particularly in the areas of transition opportunities, participant support, and recruitment and retention. This theme was identified both among sites that have had implementation success through strong

staffing and sites that were struggling due to staffing shortcomings. The availability of dedicated personnel to fill specific roles, such as counselors, was seen as a particularly effective practice. Leveraging existing site-based resources, such as other programs or educational assets, was also viewed as a crucial support for implementation success.

Implications of the evaluation's findings for the YAL Bridge program

Although technical assistance support was valued, additional supports could have been useful in Bridge sites. Stakeholders in both Bridge and traditional YAL sites praised support they had received from CUNY CAT, and stakeholders in Bridge sites noted that support from WPTI had been helpful in implementing the new curriculum. Among Bridge sites, there appeared to be a need for continued support, particularly with regard to implementation of contextualized instruction. In several sites, program directors and instructors indicated confusion around the concept of contextualized instruction, or that their understanding and implementation of contextualized instruction went beyond the "sector-focused" definition used in Bridge to include more general thematic linkages between academics and issues that were seen to be meaningful and relevant to participants' lives. These findings suggested a need for focused technical assistance on the contextualized instruction component of the program, especially how the form of contextualized learning used in Bridge differs from more general understanding of this concept.

Additional clarity and focus on the role of contextualized instruction in the Bridge curriculum would have been useful. In the Bridge curriculum, contextualized learning took place primarily within 75- to 90-minute modules addressing healthcare or information technology, which include both background information on these job fields and contextualized academic exercises. Other components, including some separate academic review sections, contained little to no contextualized material. Given that contextualized instruction—defined as academic learning presented against a backdrop of sector-specific context—was one of the core elements of the program, there appeared to be room in the curriculum for greater clarity and use of contextualized instruction. This was reinforced by the findings of low use of contextualized instruction among Bridge sites, and variation in how Bridge sites understand the concept of contextualized instruction.

More options for adaptation and broadening the Bridge curriculum's focus beyond healthcare and IT could have strengthened the program. Several Bridge sites noted that they found the material in the curriculum to be either too easy or too difficult for their population, or found the focus on just two job sectors to be limiting. Furthermore, stakeholders said that they valued opportunities to adapt the curriculum to their students' unique needs. Such comments indicated that the curriculum could be strengthened both with resources that would help sites tailor the program to their participants' academic level and inclusion of additional job sectors beyond healthcare and information technology.

Implications of the findings for the evaluation

At the time of the implementation study, the Bridge program was in a developmental stage and not yet ready for a rigorous impact evaluation. The Bridge program's implementation began in spring 2016, and had thus been in place for less than two full program cycles at the time of the implementation study site visits. Given the relatively short period of time the program had been in place, and the fact that Bridge was a complex multi-part and multi-site initiative incorporating a new academic curriculum, it was not surprising that the level of implementation was found to vary both across program components and the Bridge sites. Indeed, the study found that several sites were still working to incorporate the program into their existing structures and routines, and technical assistance support to date had focused primarily on the academic component of the program rather than work readiness or social supports. This raised the possibility that the planned impact assessment would reflect not the program's contribution to participant learning and other outcomes, but its still-developing implementation.

Similarities between the Bridge and traditional YAL sites could have limited the findings of an impact assessment. One of the key goals for the implementation study was to determine how, if at all, the traditional YAL sites were implementing activities that were consistent with the three core components of the Bridge program. In the study's planned randomized control trial design, the outcomes of participants enrolled in traditional YAL sites served as the counterfactual, or what would have been expected in the absence of the Bridge program's implementation. If the counterfactual is similar to the treatment being assessed, the results of an impact assessment will be confounded, or limited, by these similarities. The implementation study found that traditional YAL sites do implement strategies that were similar to those found in Bridge sites, particularly with regard to providing participants with academic and career transition pathways and social supports (these similarities were not unexpected, as the program models were largely aligned in this regard). It was also not clear, given the still-developing implementation of the Bridge curriculum, how different the academic instruction Bridge participants receive was from instruction provided in traditional YAL sites. Taken together, the implementation study evidence suggested that the Bridge program's contribution to participant outcomes could be obscured by the lack of distinction between Bridge and traditional YAL sites. The evaluation team therefore recommended against carrying out the planned impact study of Bridge compared to traditional YAL.

In light of the implementation study findings, NYC Opportunity and Westat decided to pursue a revised impact evaluation strategy. Based on the implementation study findings, NYC Opportunity and Westat revised the impact evaluation approach to focus on how YAL participant outcomes compare to young adults enrolled in two other New York City programs that provide pre-HSE supports. This revised approach used a quasi-experimental design to compare YAL participant outcomes (including reading and mathematics performance on the Test of Adult Basic Education) to outcomes of participants enrolled in the Adult Literacy program, which is also administered by DYCD, and pre-HSE courses offered by the Brooklyn and Queens public libraries (other than YAL). Questions addressed through the revised impact study design included:

1. Do YAL program participants have better reading performance compared to similar participants enrolled in the Adult Literacy program or library pre-HSE programs?

2. Do YAL program participants have better mathematics performance compared to similar participants enrolled in the Adult Literacy program or library pre-HSE programs?

3. Does the impact of the YAL program on reading or mathematics performance vary for participants with different demographic characteristics?

With respect to the first two evaluation questions—addressing the overall impact of YAL on reading and mathematics performance—the study found that while YAL students improved their performance during their time in the program, so did similar students enrolled in the other two programs. In other words, the study found no evidence that students enrolled in YAL did better or worse, on average, than students enrolled in the comparison programs. However, when investigating the third evaluation question, the study found that some specific groups of YAL students performed better in mathematics than students in the other two programs, while others did worse. These results are discussed in more detail in a separate report released in conjunction with this one (Ristow, Chen & Miyaoka, 2020).

Implications for other "bridge" programs

As part of its ongoing Career Pathways initiative, New York City is seeking to implement additional "bridge" style programs that can support workforce development and improved job outcomes for all city residents.   The implementation study of the YAL Bridge program suggested several areas in which administrators of other bridge programs should direct attention (including the new Advance & Earn program). First, **clearly define the meaning and scope of contextualized programming, and provide ongoing support to facilitate shared understanding**. Bridge programs share a common focus on contextualization to specific industry sectors. For the YAL Bridge program, academic instruction was designed to be placed in the context of the healthcare and IT job sectors. The implementation study suggested that there was not a common understanding of contextualized instruction across Bridge sites, indicating a need for further clarification of this key program feature.

Second, **provide allowances and support for adapting the program to fit local context and needs.** YAL Bridge program providers were given leeway to adapt the program to meet the specific needs of their students, and the implementation study showed that the Bridge sites both made such changes and valued the ability to do so. However, there were also some stakeholders (e.g., less experienced instructors) who found adaptation of the curriculum to be a challenge, suggesting that technical assistance or other support for adaptation could be useful in some cases.

Third, **comprehensive program staffing is a critical factor promoting implementation**. Having a cadre of staff to fill defined program roles—from providing student social/emotional supports to administration—was identified as a key facilitator in the implementation study. Although a strong

program staff was noted as important to successfully implementing a variety of components, this factor was critical for effectively establishing partnerships and providing student support.

Fourth, **external bridge partnerships are strengthened through alignment with the needs of participants and the characteristics of the program**. YAL Bridge programs noted a few factors that strengthened external partnerships, aside from a strong program staff as indicated above. Ensuring that the transition opportunities offered were relevant and of interest to participants was a key best practice, particularly with regard to internship partnerships. Bridge sites also noted the importance of identifying partners that held similar approaches and values with regard to supporting participants, as this could make the transition smoother and more comfortable for participants to undertake.

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Attachment A: Implementation Rating Matrix

Young Adult Literacy Bridge Program Evaluation

Implementation Matrix for Bridge Program Components

Component One: Contextualized instruction that teaches participants academic skills against a backdrop of a **sector-specific** context

Indicator of implementation	Data source	Rating
1.1. Core literacy and mathematics lesson instruction includes contextualized sector-specific information.	Classroom observation	0 = No contextualized instruction observed 1 = observed, *without* focus on healthcare or IT 2 = observed, *with* focus on healthcare or IT
1.2. Sector-specific contextualized instruction addresses specific job areas .	Classroom observation	0 = No contextualized instruction observed 1 = Contextualized instruction does not address specific job areas (i.e., a general "health theme") 2 = Contextualized instruction addresses specific job areas (i.e., roles of a healthcare technician)
1.3. Core mathematics and literacy lessons that contain contextualized sector-specific information are 75-90 minutes in duration, totaling 300-360 minutes (5-6 hours) per week.[1]	Instructor interview (post-observation); PD interview; Daily schedule	0 = No evidence of implementation of contextualized lessons 1 = contextualized lessons are < 38 min. each or < 150 min. per week 2 = contextualized lessons are 38-74 min. each or 150-299 min. per week 3 = contextualized lessons are at least 75 min. each and 300 min. per week
		Rating for Component 1 (sum of 1.1, 1.2 & 1.3 sub-ratings) 0 = no implementation 1-3 = low implementation 4-5 = moderate implementation 6-7 = high implementation

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[1] This refers to the overall lesson duration, not the duration of contextualized instruction within mathematics or literacy lessons.

Component Two: Strong "**bridges**" between programmatic providers and bridge destinations (e.g., HSE programs, employment and training opportunities, internships)

Indicator of implementation	Data source	Rating
Presence of bridge opportunities (2.1-2.3)[2]		
2.1. Site connects students with educational "bridge" opportunities (e.g., HSE program, college, or other continuing education.	Workscope; PD interview; student focus group	0 = No evidence of education "bridge" opportunities 1 = site offers one or more education "bridge" opportunity
2.2. Site connects students with work training "bridge" opportunities (e.g., job skills classes, classroom projects focused on learning about a field of work).	Workscope; PD interview; student focus group	0 = No evidence of work training "bridge" opportunities 1 = site offers one or more work training "bridge" opportunity
2.3. Site connects students with hands-on work experience "bridge" opportunities (e.g., internships, job shadowing, volunteering).	Workscope; PD interview; student focus group	0 = No evidence of hands-on work experience "bridge" opportunities 1 = site offers one or more hands-on work experience "bridge" opportunity
Strength of bridge partnerships/pathways (2.4)		
2.4. Site has established strong "bridge" partnerships with bridge destinations	PD interview	0 = No evidence of partnerships between provider and bridge destinations 1 = At least one partnership present, but partnership(s) are weak (i.e. communicate rarely/sporadically with partners, partnerships are minimally enhancing or impacting program, students not using partnerships, students being referred, but not following through on bridge destinations, showing little follow-up) 2 = At least one strong partnership present (i.e. partner involved in implementation/decision-making, frequent communication and follow-up, students being referred and attending bridge destination/internship/work experience)
Make note if bridge partnerships are internal or external to the site (check one):		**Rating for Component 2 (sum of 2.1-2.4 sub-ratings)**
Site has only internal bridge partners		0 = no implementation
Site has only external bridge partners		1-2 = low implementation
Site has both internal and external bridge partners		3-4 = moderate implementation
Site does not have any bridge partners		5 = high implementation

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[2] Capture information about the quality of "bridge" transition support in the third component.

Component Three: A variety of **support services** including career counseling **with transition support**

Indicator of implementation	Data source	Rating
3.1. Site offers career-focused support services to students (e.g., career counseling).	Workscope; PD interview; student focus group	0 = No evidence of career-focused support services available to students 1 = site offers career-focused support *without* transition support[3] 2 = site offers career-focused support *with* transition support[4]
3.2. Site offers education-focused support services to students (e.g., college counseling).	Workscope; PD interview; student focus group	0 = No evidence of education-focused support services available to students 1 = site offers education-focused support *without* transition support 2 = site offers education-focused support *with* transition support
3.3. Site offers other types of student support services (e.g., mentoring, referral to health services, help with personal or family issues).	Workscope; PD interview; student focus group	0 = No evidence of other support services available to students 1 = site offers other types of student support services
		Rating for Component 3 (sum of 3.1, 3.2 & 3.3 sub-ratings) 0 = no implementation 1-2 = low implementation 3-4 = moderate implementation 5 = high implementation

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[3] For example, the site provides application materials but no assistance completing them, or a referral to a program with no follow-up with the student to check on progress.

[4] For example, the site provides ongoing counseling during the application and interview process, or facilitates communication between the student and bridge destination.