OPEN DOORS PROGRAM PROFILE

Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance

This profile was produced as part of the Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative to promote shared learning about promising youth reengagement practices and program models in the Open Doors system. In spring 2023, we collected data from six Open Doors sites (two in each pathway: GED-plus, high school diploma, and college) to develop profiles of programs with evidence of promising student outcomes. Information about this project and the methods used to develop this profile are provided at the end of this report.

The Central Valley School District (CVSD) serves 14,700 students across 80 square miles in Eastern Washington's Spokane Valley.[1] The Graduation Alliance high school diploma program is the largest of three Open Doors programs in the district, with 159 students enrolled in 2020–21. The district also offers college and GED-plus pathway options through other providers. The district partnership with Graduation Alliance, a national for-profit company that operates several models of online learning, started as an alternative education program in 2012. The partnership transitioned to an open Doors model in 2015 to better align with the community need for a reengagement model.

> ## Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance
>
> - High school diploma pathway
> - Established in 2015
> - For-profit partnership with one district
> - Asynchronous online courses
> - In-person and virtual case management
> - **159** students enrolled in 2020—21
> - Average age at enrollment: **17**
> - Average credits at enrollment: **11**

Having multiple Open Doors providers and pathway options, staff members say, enables "flexibility" in how the district serves students. High school counselors work with students to assess their needs and find the "least restrictive environment" for reengagement that fits their current situation and goals. The district refers students who are disengaged or "who are not going to make it [to graduation] without some sort of intervention" to Graduation Alliance. District staff members say that the level of intensive student support Graduation Alliance provides would not be "financially feasible" for the district to do on its own, and that they view the partnership as an opportunity to "serve every kid in our community" and help them to "get over the finish line."

> " [In our district] having an Open Doors program has always been an important way to make sure that we are serving students ... There is a focus on making sure that we're serving every kid in our community as best we can until we don't have an option to serve them.
>
> District staff member

Partnership Structure and Roles

Graduation Alliance and the district describe their partnership as a "team" approach to supporting students through reengagement. When students show signs of disengagement from school, CVSD staff members hold face-to-face meetings with each student and their parent or guardian (when possible) to provide information about alternative options for successfully completing high school and collaboratively determine a "best fit" for the student. The essence of the meeting is to instill hope and optimism and to set goals for the future. To reduce barriers and capitalize on the student's existing motivation, CVSD staff members and the student complete a registration call to Graduation Alliance to "get the ball rolling" toward enrollment. Young people leave the meeting with an understanding of who their "local" support team is.

> ... [district staff are] preparing the student doing those handoffs, working with the counselors, explaining the program; that goes a long way to the success of the student. Versus a program that just says, "Here's a number. Call them."
>
> Graduation Alliance staff member

The district also provides Graduation Alliance with a list of young people it has designated their status as dropped out" or "unknown."

Graduation Alliance staff members lead asynchronous online classes and provide case management through an academic coach and a local advocate from the community who is employed by Graduation Alliance. Students retain access to district resources (e.g., counseling, sports, prom) while enrolled in Graduation Alliance and return to the district for graduation after meeting all program requirements. However, both students and staff members note challenges in accessing these resources given that students lose their district email address while enrolled in the program. Graduation Alliance provides district staff members with real-time, individual-level data about student progress via an online dashboard and annually provides the district with aggregate-level data they can use in reporting to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). CVSD staff members use the portal to continue to track and communicate with students to encourage progress and to let them know that they are still part of the CSVD community.

Student Population

In 2020–21, the program served 159 students after a peak of 167 students in 2019–20. Across six academic years (2015–16 to 2020–21), on average Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance students enter the program with a higher GPA and more high school credits compared with Open Doors students statewide (table 4). The partners and young people we spoke with suggest that Graduation Alliance is an especially good fit for **younger students who are far from graduation** as the program offers a shorter timeline to a diploma that "seems attainable." They also say that the online instruction and flexible schedule works well for young people who do not want to be in the school building environment. The district observes that more students are disengaging from in-person school because of mental health challenges, especially in recent years.

Tables 1–5. Average Student Characteristics (2015/16–2020/21), Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance Open Doors

TABLE 1

Gender	Percentage
Male	61%
Female	39%
Non-binary	0%

TABLE 2

Race	Percentage
White	78%
Latino/a/x	8%
Two or more races	7%
Black or African American	2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	3%
Asian	<1%
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	<1%
Race not provided	0%

TABLE 3

High school experiences and programs	Percentage
Free or reduced-price lunch	70%
Learning assistance program	18%
Experienced homelessness	18%
Special education	16%
504 plan	9%
English language learner	4%
Migrant education program	0%

TABLE 4

Previous high school progress	
Cumulative high school grade point average at Open Doors enrollment	1.54
Cumulative high school credits earned at Open Doors enrollment	11.32

TABLE 5

	Age
Average age (first year in program)	17

Note: All data originally came from Comprehensive Education Data and Research System data files and are students' high school records.
Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center.

Program Design and Implementation

STAFFING STRUCTURE

The program is overseen by the Graduation Alliance **program manager**. Students take asynchronous online classes from a variety of instructors but work with the same **academic coaches** and **local advocates** over the course of their enrollment. The **director of student services** oversees the coaches and advocates, who meet in weekly huddles to discuss how to best support their shared students. They use a student information system to coordinate comprehensive student support across the entire team, and a crisis response form to communicate about urgent issues and elevate concerns to the district. The district provides additional support, mainly around enrollment and graduation, through a principal, social worker, and administrative assistant.

Staff members say that there are a "a lot of players for one student" in the Graduation Alliance model, with the goal of providing students with a "network of support" made up of staff members who specialize in different areas (e.g., content, coaching, wraparound services). Having multiple people working with a student enables staff members to collaboratively support students while focusing on their areas of expertise.

PROGRAM MODEL

Pre-program

"Warm handoff" from district. Youth are typically referred to the program through a school counselor. Families meet in person with their local "cheerleaders" (principal, social worker, liaison) and make the registration phone call. District and program staff members follow up with youth to encourage enrollment.

Direct outreach. Several times a year enrollment coaches reach out to youth who have already exited the district to invite them to reconnect through the program.

Enrollment and onboarding

Enrollment and placement. Enrollment coaches are the "first point of contact" that reaches out to students and gathers the information needed to get them enrolled (e.g., transcripts). Students take the STAR reading and math assessment.

"Strong start" call. Academic coaches contact students within 24 hours of enrollment to discuss their goals, education history, and program requirements.

Orientation sessions. After receiving a laptop and a mobile hotspot, students take an online orientation course called "I Will Graduate." Within a month, students are required to participate in an in-person orientation session with their local advocate.

Program experience

Instruction. Students take three-to-four-week asynchronous learning courses with licensed teachers who are available via chat. 24-hour tutoring is also available online.

Case management. Each week students are required either to participate in an online study session with their academic coach or to meet with their local advocate. The academic coach connects with students individually to help with "pace and progress" on their student learning plan, in addition to offering group study sessions. The local advocate facilitates weekly in-person community-building activities and provides access to wraparound support, reaching out to students individually in person or via phone.

Next steps support

Graduation planning. The local advocate and academic coaches both review a High School and Beyond Plan with students to understand their goals and help with selecting courses related to their interests. Students also take a graduation preparation course that covers topics like the FASFA and resume writing. Students retain access to their district high school counselor if they want to request support with college and career preparation.
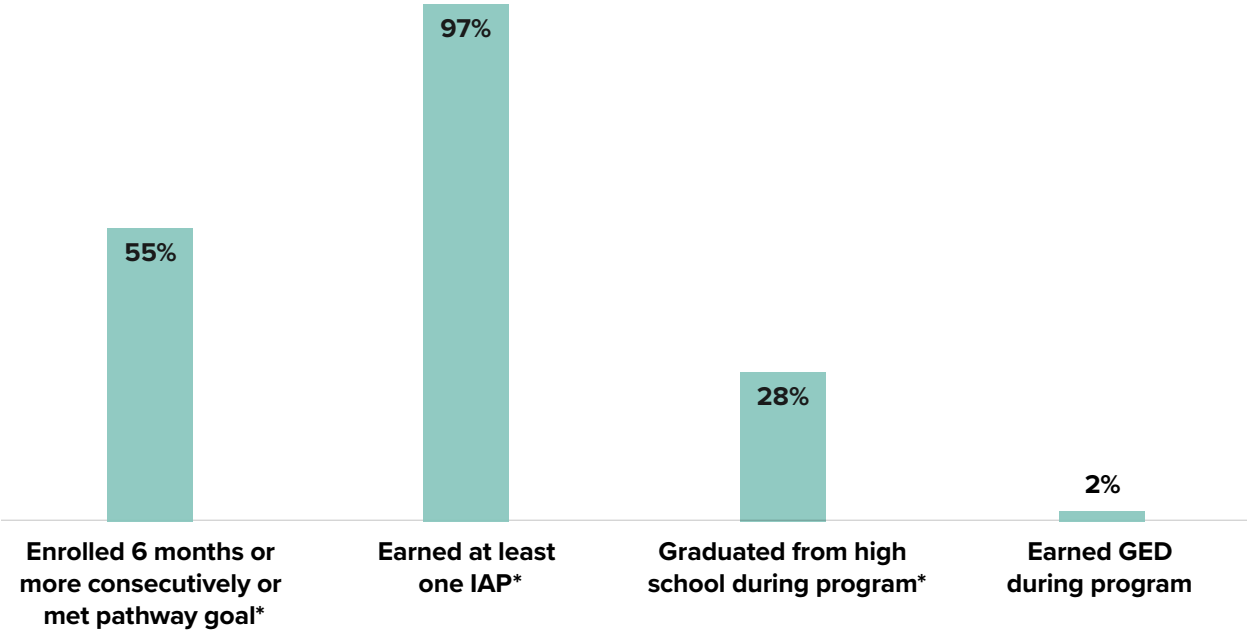
Student Progress and Outcomes

SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC PROGRESS

Almost all students earned at least one indicator of academic progress, and more than a quarter earned a high school diploma.

Across six academic years (2015–16 to 2020–21), on average about 55 percent of students persisted in the Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance program for six months or more and 97 percent earned at least one indicator academic progress (figure 1). This is a higher rate compared with Open Doors high school diploma programs statewide (43 percent and 67 percent, respectively). Since 2015, 28 percent of students earned a high school diploma during the program, higher than the statewide average for Open Doors high school diploma programs (18 percent). An additional two percent earned a GED.

Figure 1. Program outcomes, Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance Open Doors (2015–16 to 2020–21)

55%	97%	28%	2%
Enrolled 6 months or more consecutively or met pathway goal*	Earned at least one IAP*	Graduated from high school during program*	Earned GED during program

*Higher than statewide average for the high school diploma pathway.
Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center.

Students are engaged by the flexible, self-paced nature of the program.

In interviews, students and alumni often describe how **being able to do their schoolwork at a time that works for them,** whether that is late at night or over the weekend, keeps them engaged and on track toward their goal. They appreciate working with their academic coach to figure out the pace that works for them. Many students are excited about the compressed timeline of the courses and the potential to **earn credits faster** than they could in the district.

> **I'm most proud of how fast I graduated and how fast I got the credits because …**
> **I thought I was going to drop out for the longest time.**
>
> Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance student[2]

Young people are also motivated by **tracking their own real-time academic progress** (e.g., credits earned, credits left to earn, estimated GPA) in the program portal's My Pathway dashboard. As one student suggested, the balance of the flexible class schedule, responsive instructors, and set expectations for when they need to complete their coursework made the program "more engaging" than physical school and fostered a "sense of duty" to meet the timelines.

> **[My Pathway] shows you your progress, like it shows you your credits going up …**
> **I like seeing it go up. It like makes you want to work harder and get it done faster.**
>
> Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance student

Staff members describe this as making sure students have both a "line of sight" to graduation—transparency about the steps they need to take to reach their goals—and the support they need to get there. Each time students log into the portal, they can see how many courses they have left to graduate, which staff members say is critical to "keep them interested."

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

Young people experience an increased sense of efficacy and agency.

Current students and alumni expressed that these flexible program processes contributed to a sense of agency in achieving their goals with program support. They spoke with great pride about "sticking to my work" and making progress towards completing their degree through the program. Many came to view themselves differently as learners, both in terms of their ability to complete high school and their potential to continue their education after graduation.

> " I'm most proud that I completed high school because I didn't think I was for a long time. There's such an easy way to be able to just be like, "Well, I'm online so I don't…" And get lost in life and completely forget about your classes. So, I'm proud that I still showed up and still did my work, and I still actually learned things.
>
> Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance student

A couple of students also described exploring their career interests through the classes, identifying subject areas that they enjoyed and may want to pursue in postsecondary education.

> " There was a lot of business courses that I was doing good in. So I was thinking about maybe going to college for taking a business class … it kind of pushed me to maybe want to go to college—and even then I was thinking about never even finishing [high] school. So that's just a big accomplishment for me.
>
> Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance student

Positive relationships with staff members facilitate engagement and progress.

Current students and alumni describe positive relationships with their academic coaches and local advocates, often in contrast to previous high school experiences. First, they note **proactive and positive communication**, with academic coaches or local advocates reaching out to them several times each week via email or text message. They describe these exchanges as helpful in recognizing their accomplishments and figuring out how to address challenges that come up in their academic and personal lives. One student suggested that they appreciated the frequent positive communication from their coach—even if it came as a "shock" given their previous experiences with educators. Staff members say that with student permission, they will follow up with a family member or friend if they are unable to reach the student.

> " They'll reach out to you five times a week. Or if you accomplish something, say you got a class done early or you got a class done on time and you were struggling, they will send you paragraphs on how proud they are of you and how much they support you. … And that built a lot of trust.
>
> Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance student

Next, young people say that **staff members connect with them on a personal level** by doing things to make them feel both seen and heard. Staff members remember details about their lives, inquiring about hobbies, pets, and family members. Staff members employ a variety of strategies to "find a way to connect" personally with each student. Online, this includes opening meetings with reflection questions or games and requiring cameras to be on during study sessions. In person, the local advocate meets students in a donut shop for games and other activities, in addition to going to other places where students may gather (e.g., sports events) to cultivate relationships. Staff members also make time to check in with each student individually by inviting them into an online break-out room or stepping aside with them during an in-person gathering. Staff members suggest that these brief, one-on-one interactions are a chance to "dig deeper" and understand how they can support the students with their goals. As one staff member noted: "We do have these deadlines and all of that, but it's really like, how are they doing? Because if they're not okay, they're not going to do the work."

One staff member described this as putting the **"person before academics."** Young people agree that this relationship-based approach helps to build trust and makes them more willing to "open up" to staff members and ask for support with challenges in their academic and personal lives. Staff members say that they seek to listen to students in these interactions, to "validate their concerns" as legitimate barriers, and then to help them address barriers to reconnecting to learning.

Key Strategies

PROGRAM STRATEGIES

Outreach and relationship-building

- Offer youth multiple staff members to connect with.
- Personalize communication to youth, emphasizing positive reinforcement and coaching.
- Communicate frequently using multiple methods (text message, phone, email, chat).
- Find ways to connect on a personal basis with each interaction.
- Require cameras to be on during small-group sessions and facilitate relationship-building activities.

Case management and wraparound support

- Meet individually with each student on a weekly basis, including during group sessions.
- Coach students in setting both small and large goals and follow up regularly to encourage them and celebrate progress.

- Send information about local resources (e.g., free supplies, food) even if not requested.

- Staff members meet weekly to "huddle" and coordinate support for students.

Relevant and flexible learning opportunities that build on student experiences and strengths

- Academic coaches develop an individualized course plan for each student based on their goals.

- Students have multiple options for completing course assignments and program requirements.

- A variety of staff members are available to support students with academic questions—instructors, academic coaches, local advocates, and 24-hour online tutors.

Student voice and choice

- Students can track their own academic progress and easily switch courses.

- Students receive weekly surveys after each contact to measure program satisfaction.

Partnership Strategies

A SHARED SENSE OF PURPOSE AND TIMELY COMMUNICATION

The district describes Graduation Alliance as "natural partners" who "come alongside districts" to support young people. Both partners suggest that because the students re-enroll in a district school or program for graduation there is a strong sense of "joint ownership" of the student's progress that encourages the organizations to work closely together. The district notes that timely communication and access to data distinguishes this partnership, as district staff members can quickly access information about student progress via a dashboard.

USE OF DATA AND GRANTS FOR CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The partners meet annually at the end of the school year to review data, assess needs, and problem solve. They review key data including graduation rate, credit-earning rate, net promoter scores, and exit reasons. After conducting a needs assessment that identified gaps between registration and enrollment, the district recently secured school improvement grant funds to add an "additional layer of support" in the form of a district social worker to help students through their transition to Graduation Alliance. In the future, the social worker will also support students throughout their time in the program and interface with the

local liaison. This may address the need, identified by both the students and the district, to better maintain their connection to district resources.

ALIGNED LEADERSHIP WITH THE DISTRICT ENSURES PROGRAM CHAMPIONS

Graduation Alliance notes that strong district buy-in from "the top down" about the importance of youth reengagement provides a foundation of shared values for the partnership. District staff members agree, saying that the principal and district leadership are "aligned in our beliefs" about how to support students. The district goes on to highlight the value of having enough state funding for an "educational leader" to serve as principal and "champion" of the program within the district.

About this Project

The Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative (CPRI) is a collaboration between Education Northwest and Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to strengthen the capacity of the Open Doors system and to increase equitable education and workforce outcomes for youth. Our purpose is to use data to promote shared learning across the Open Doors system and nationally about promising youth reengagement practices and program models. This project is funded by the Ballmer Group and Kaiser Family Foundation.

Education Northwest worked closely with an advisory committee of local and national experts to identify practices and strategies that make a program effective and successful. We developed a statewide Open Doors Theory of Action in collaboration with the CPRI advisory committee, the Open Doors steering committee, and programs across the state. We also analyzed program and student data (2016–2021) to understand the short- and long-term outcomes for each program site and selected sites doing better than expected in meeting their pathway goal for students historically underserved in education. We also considered issues such as program size, location, provider type, and student characteristics in selecting sites that represent the diversity of program models and communities across the state. In spring 2023, we collected data from six Open Doors sites (two in each pathway: GED-plus, high school diploma, and college) to develop profiles of programs with evidence of promising student outcomes.

For more information about the CPRI initiative or questions regarding the information presented in this memo, please contact Julie Petrokubi julie.petrokubi@ednw.org.

Methods

Education Northwest developed this program profile from artifact review and online interviews/focus groups with six Graduation Alliance staff members, three district staff members, and four current or former students. We also analyzed quantitative program and student data (2016–2021) from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center to produce the student demographics and outcomes figures.

Thank you to the program team, district partners, and current and former students for taking the time to share your stories and perspectives about the Central Valley Graduation Alliance Program.

Recommended citation

Endnotes

[1] https://www.cvsd.org/apps/pages/CVSDprofile

[2] Due to the small sample size and need to preserve anonymity, we do not distinguish between quotations of Open Doors students and alumni in this profile report.