OPEN DOORS PROGRAM PROFILE

Gravity at Capital Region Education Service District 113–Olympia

This profile was produced as part of the <u>Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative</u> 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.

Gravity is a multi-site program operating year-round that includes 31 districts across several counties in Washington state. Gravity Olympia is one of six alternative education programs operating in partnership with Capital Region Educational Service District (ESD) 113, a region that includes Grays Harbor, Mason County, Lacey, Lewis County, Yelm, and Olympia. Olympia and Lacey, Gravity's two Thurston County sites, are in moreurban areas than the others.

A GED-plus pathway program, Gravity Olympia originally drew students from many districts. As more community resources came to the region

> ## Gravity at Capital Region ESD 113 – Olympia
>
> - GED-plus pathway
> - ESD-multi-district partnership
> - In-person with online option
> - In-person and virtual case management
> - **159** students enrolled in 2020—21
> - Average age at enrollment: **17**
> - Average credits at enrollment: **8.68**

the program came to serve primarily young people from the Olympia School District, from which about 60 percent of currently enrolled students came. This site (and others) shifted from an in-person, drop-in center to a virtual program during the COVID-19 pandemic. It now uses a **group-based instructional model with coursework offered in person.** Along with these shifts in service delivery, intentional cross-site changes have focused on increasing connection between students and staff members.

In interviews, program leadership and staff members reflected on the shift from formal teacher-student relationships (e.g., using formal titles) to more informal practices and the positive impacts this has had on building a trust-based environment. Staff members also noted that "formality" involves balancing the need to reduce barriers to connection with students and the importance of establishing their roles as instructors and mentors. To allow for this shift toward informality, Gravity increased the time for staff members to engage in **one-on-ones with students** for both relationship-building and individualized support.

Partnership Structure and Roles

The Gravity partnership began with ESD 113 and **community-based organizations.** The program expanded when Gravity proposed a partnership on an Open Doors program to the Olympia School District. The initial intention was to particularly support opportunity youth in reengaging to pursue a GED and then either transition to postsecondary education or employment. The Gravity Open Doors program is one of several regional support services that ESD 113 offers to districts. Other ESD program offerings include services for military youth and youth aged 19 and above; mental, behavioral, and substance use prevention support; and nursing services and training through the School Nurse Corps—which provides Gravity with school nurse support.

Gravity does not offer direct support services. Instead, the program refers students to area service providers. Engaging informal partners is an important function of the program. Staff members shared the following formal and informal partnerships, which reflect resources available locally and regionally to Gravity students:

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORTS

ESD 113 administers Gravity, providing it with resources for multilingual learners receiving English language learner services and for special education support.

Local community colleges provides other dual credit programs like Running Start and college-transition support for eligible and ready students.

WRAPAROUND SERVICES

Sea Mar Community Health Centers provides services for uninsured youth and immigration services as well as medical dental, social, and behavioral health support through its network of clinics.

Community Youth Services provides many basic needs services and partnership on safe and stable housing and mental health for enrolled students.

Dept of Children Youth and Families (DCYF) provides referral-based behavioral health services.

CAREER AND JOB TRAINING

Garden-Raised Bounty (GRuB) is an Olympia-based nonprofit and active farm that provides sustainability programming and a work-learning program.

New Market Skills Center is a member of the Washington State Skill Center Association located in Tumwater that provides hands-on skill development, course credits, job certification, and career support.

Equus Workforce Solutions provides career, family disability, and business support to enrolled youth through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

WorkSource, Thurston County provides employment and training services in person and online.

Student Population

While Gravity's central goal is GED completion, staff members and students reflected on its culture, in which the GED is a first step to continued learning. The program's original drop-in, connection-center model held more narrow goals around reducing individual student barriers and connecting young people to (primarily) wraparound services. This shifted with Gravity's partnership with Olympia School District, resulting in the program having a greater focus on academics, instruction, and school culture (e.g., use of the High School and Beyond Plan in initial goal-setting conversations with students). Students who attend Gravity's Olympia site are most often from the local district. Many students experience housing instability and were unenrolled from comprehensive high school or who have been determined to be at high risk of disengaging.

> "
> Meeting kids where they're at, providing some hope, and giving them a vision for a future that's different than the present they're currently living. It's really that hope. And then building their resiliency. Many don't have a great support system.
>
> District partner

Across six academic years of Gravity Olympia student data (from 2015–16 to 2020–21) we see that most students (79%) were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and 70 percent identify as white (table 2). One in three Gravity Olympia students has experienced homelessness and the same proportion receive Learning Assistance Program (LAP) support. As in many Open Doors programs, there are more students who identify as male (56%) than as female (table 1).

Tables 1–5. Average Student Characteristics (2015/16–2020/21), Gravity at Capital Region ESD 113

TABLE 1

Gender	Percentage
Male	56%
Female	44%
Non-binary	0%

TABLE 2

Race	Percentage
White	70%
Latino/a/x	13%
Two or more races	9%
Black or African American	5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
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	79%
Learning assistance program	33%
Experienced homelessness	32%
Special education	23%
504 plan	10%
English language learner	2%
Migrant education program	0%

TABLE 4

Previous high school progress	
Cumulative high school grade point average at Open Doors enrollment	1.06
Cumulative high school credits earned at Open Doors enrollment	8.68

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. A 504 plan refers to students receiving support under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which protects students from discrimination based on disability. Learning Assistance Program (LAP) funding stays with the school district. "Ever HS504" refers to students receiving support under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which protects students from discrimination based on disability. "Ever HS504" only includes students who received services for one or more years in high school. Learning Assistance Program (LAP) funding stays with the school district and these data pull student service information from existing K–12 records. Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center.

Program Design and Implementation

STAFFING STRUCTURE

Gravity Open Doors has several on- and off-site staff members. Case managers and teachers hold distinct roles but work collaboratively to offer whole-student support. Staff members promote a culture of care, support youth self-advocacy, and recruit supportive adults into young people's lives. Over time, the instructional staff positions have become full-time roles held by certified teachers. Staff members across roles share practices of encouragement, celebrating milestones, and maintaining high expectations of youth. In addition to the site-specific roles below, Gravity has a registrar, database team, and coordinators who support case managers with onboarding and training.

- **Director and assistant director –** Support staff, manage partner relationships, and coordinate student service offerings so Olympia and other ESD 113 sites each have access to an array of supports.

- **Case managers and retention and engagement coordinator –** Serve as students' first point of contact with the program, lead intake, manage regular check-ins with students, and provide support services in coordination with students and community partners. Staff members in these roles check ins regularly to engage with students, offer support, and provide program updates. Case managers track attendance and proactively reach out to and support students who arrive late.

- **Teachers –** Develop and lead culturally relevant lessons and provide course navigation and academic goal-planning support. Teachers develop novel curricula based on the GED and work with case managers to check in with students.

- **Special education teacher –** Provides direct instruction to students who previously received special education services through the school district. This staff role is funded through the site's K–12 district partnership.

PROGRAM MODEL

Pre-program

Referral. Most students are **identified by word-of-mouth,** young people themselves, or family members via an online application and initial engagement with program staff members. Fewer students are referred by **comprehensive high school staff members.**

Enrollment and onboarding

Enrollment and placement. Prospective students engage in **one-on-one goal-setting** conversations organized around the High School and Beyond Plan followed by a group orientation. Students take the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems test for academic placement. This program uses a **cohort** model with rolling enrollment and courses scheduled in cohort blocks. Case managers meet individually with entering students about their goals. Students select their two-hour, twice-a-week cohort schedule—Mondays and Wednesdays or Tuesdays and Thursdays—with Fridays open for any additional individualized support.

Program experience

Instruction. Students choose to learn individually, in small groups, or online. In-person students attend a minimum of four hours a week and receive weekly staff communication. All classes are taught by Gravity teachers who also proctor GED prep tests.

Case management. Staff members engage in regular and proactive communication. They focus on building relationships, making referrals for wraparound supports, and early identification of barriers to attendance.

Next steps support

Graduation planning. Regular meetings with case managers and teachers provide students with navigation and support. Meetings address student progress towards GED completion and their High School and Beyond Plan.
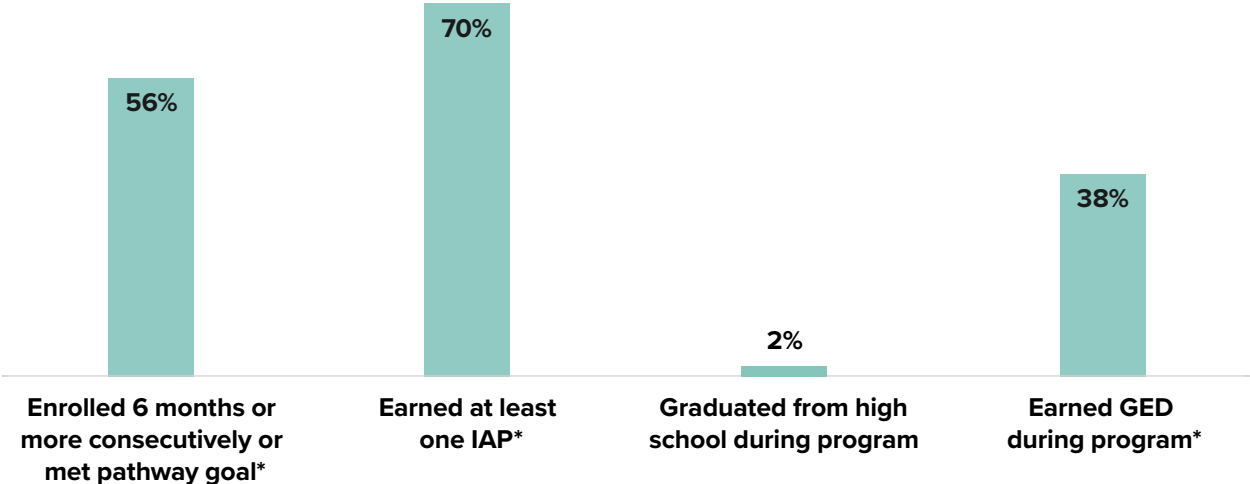
Transition support. Students may receive credits and/or grades depending on the classes completed. Quarterly credits earned are sent to the student's home district to be recorded in the student's transcript. Students may obtain official transcripts from their district at any time. Community colleges provide transition support via Running Start and job training partnerships. The program supports students in transitioning back to their sending district for high school diploma completion.

Student Progress and Outcomes

SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC PROGRESS

On average, from 2015–16 to 2020–21, about **56 percent of students persisted in the Gravity Olympia site for six months or more (or completed their GED),** and **70 percent earned at least one indicator of academic progress,** a higher rate than in Open Doors GED-plus programs statewide overall. Since the 2015–16 academic year, **38 percent of students have completed their GED**—a rate that is higher than the statewide average—while an additional two percent earned a high school diploma during the program.

Figure 1. Program outcomes Gravity at Capital Region ESD 113—Olympia, (2015–16 to 2020–21)

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*
56%	70%	2%	38%

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

Program staff members and students described **proactive approaches to student outreach,** especially during intake or in response to absences, such as reaching out via phone or text message when students are 15 minutes late to provide support. Both groups found this collective practice of quickly reengaging young people to be valuable. Staff members reflected on shifts over time in Gravity's approach to case management from a passive model to a hands-on one with a focus on monitoring attendance. Staff members and students alike described the program's case management as personalized, timely, and focused on strong relationships. While not fully implemented, case managers had training in the "Check and Connect"[1] model and their core roles are to monitor student engagement, identify basic needs supports, and reduce barriers to attendance.

> "We worked with the school district to figure out how [our student] could take the school bus into town because they lived somewhere where there wasn't public transportation available. And then they take public transportation from the local high school to here, and now they've been coming more regularly. And just how attendance, we can't really help students make academic progress or make any progress if they're not here. So sometimes figuring out that attendance piece is a big first step."
>
> Program staff member

Much of Gravity's **instructional approach is individualized** given the variation in students' prior knowledge and self-pace during the program. As a GED-plus pathway program, learning modules are centered on math, science, social studies, and language arts—the four components of the GED. Students work closely with teachers one-on-one or in small groups to complete these modules and take practice tests. Gravity students who complete GED subject area tests can put those credits towards high school graduation if they decide to return to complete their diploma.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

Staff and students discussed the importance of meeting goals along the way and how confident and comfortable they feel in the classroom. Lesson plans integrate course content and academic skill-building. One staff reflected on ways to embed and model academic check-ins:

> "...we're showing them that it's okay to come to ask a question. Some of them really like to work independently, but I don't prefer that they just complete a whole assignment and give it to me. I want to see that they're on track so that if they are making mistakes, we can get them on track right away. With the first math assignment, I will write the word 'stop' on their paper so when students get to the word stop, they need to check in with me. I would just tell them to check in with me when you finish the first page, and they wouldn't do it. Now they're better about saying, 'Okay, let's check my work so far'. Some students are not necessarily great about asking for help at first."
>
> Program staff member

FUTURE ORIENTATION AND CAREER/COLLEGE SKILLS

Students shared about career-connected learning and the importance of gaining work experience during the program. After receiving their GED, students are connected to partners if pursuing a two-year, four-year, or technical degree or certificate. Gravity staff members continue to work with them as they explore and transition to their next steps.

> **If they are just kind of not sure about what the next step is or need a little handholding to get there. It's not like, okay, you graduated, goodbye. They can stay. Maybe at that point have come to trust us and feel comfortable here and they can stay enrolled and keep working with us until they're fully transitioned.**
>
> Program staff member

Key Strategies

PROGRAM STRATEGIES

Outreach and relationship-building

- Identify and address barriers among teachers and students.
- Frequent communication through varied approaches, high expectations for students, and celebration of achievements.
- Support teaching staff members in learning student names (e.g., taking student photos during orientation).

Case management and wraparound support

- Schedule ample time to meaningfully connect.
- Use of academic and engagement data for case management (e.g., monitoring attendance).

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

- Educators created a novel curriculum in the GED content areas and organized it into small, digestible modules.
- Time allocated for individualized instruction and self-paced work.

- Modeling academic self-advocacy by embedding opportunities for students to check in with teachers as components of initial class assignments.
- Promote a credit transfer option for students who decide they would like a high school diploma.

Student voice and choice

- Engage students in off-site experiences through partnerships with community-based organizations.
- Convene current and former students to learn about and improve program experience and systems of support.

Partnership Strategies

RELATIONSHIPS- AND STUDENTS-FIRST ORIENTATION

Gravity leadership described the importance of community buy-in for partnerships: "Once we got through that at the community, the [community-based organization] level and then districts signed on pretty quickly." To maintain relationships, program staff members and leadership discussed a culture of shared organizational relationships and active engagement with community-based organizations. **Students benefit when each staff member brings their own community relationships to the program.** Additionally, district partners and staff members described how district and ESD partnerships are foundational and require shared understanding and common goals to be successful.

> "
> I think having an open communication about purpose and function [and] then creating some systems and protocols that you can both follow ...
>
> District partner

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS THAT DEEPEN IN-CLASS LEARNING

Students described the value of having a well-rounded array of services. This included mental health providers, hands-on work experience, and paid opportunities. Off-site experiences also made students feel more connected to what they were learning in the program. Students described participation in Garden-Raised Bounty (GRuB)'s "GroundEd" program as an example of a strong program partnership with the important programmatic components of hands-on learning, job experience, and a participation stipend.

CULTURE OF DATA WITHIN THE PARTNERSHIP

Access to and use of student progress information has been an asset of the Gravity program and has contributed to improved partner experience. During interviews, district partners reflected on the importance of student outcomes data and communication. As one partner said, "… they're taking data on how many times a student attends and their success, and the success of completing the GED in a certain timeframe. They're also doing interviews with the kids and then they're going to start this year tracking kids where they're going in the future."

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 seven ESD 113 Gravity staff members, two district staff members, and three current or former students. Transcripts and session notes were qualitatively coded and analyzed. While this profile includes the ideas and experiences of students, it does not include direct quotes as participating students requested not to be recorded. 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 ESD 113 Gravity program.

Recommended citation

Cooley, S., McLennan, D., Hodara M., & Fujita-Conrads, E. (2023). *Open Doors Program Profile Gravity at Capital Region ESD 113–Olympia.* Education Northwest.

Endnote

[1] Christenson, S. S., Stout, K., & Pohl, A. (2012). *Check and Connect a comprehensive student engagement intervention: Implementing with fidelity.* University of Minnesota. https://checkandconnect.umn.edu