OPEN DOORS YOUTH REENGAGEMENT SUMMER PILOT EVALUATION

Reducing Barriers to Learning for Students

Prepared for the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) by Education Northwest.

2025

Open Doors Youth Reengagement Summer Pilot Evaluation

Reducing Barriers to Learning for Students

2025

Prepared by

Julie Petrokubi, Ph.D., Managing Researcher, Education Northwest
julie.petrokubi@ednw.org | 503.275.9649

Evaluation Team Members
Emi Fujita-Conrads, Ph.D.

Michelle Hodara, Ph.D.

Mary Padden, Ph.D.

Camila Kennedy

Grace Gowdy, Ph.D.

Acknowledgements

We extend our thanks to the many individuals who made this report possible. First, thank you to the team at the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, especially Mandy Paradise, Associate Director of Reengagement, who initiated this evaluation and provided guidance and support every step of the way, from the research design and data collection to analysis and findings. We thank the program staff members and students on the Open Doors Summer Pilot Evaluation Advisory Group for providing feedback on project design, data collection instruments, and insights into study implications. Finally, we thank the Open Doors summer 2024 pilot site staff members, partners, students, and families who took the time to share valuable insights about your experiences through interviews and focus groups during the site visits. Thank you for being so generous with your time and knowledge.

OPEN DOORS SUMMER PILOT EVALUATION ADVISORY GROUP MEMBERS

- Alissa Erwin
- Amaya Hernandez
- Arthur Dennis
- Gabriela Granados Alvarado
- John Luvera
- Mandy Paradise
- Melanie Olson
- Mike Closner
- Sage Nastali
- Terrance Nixon
- Toniah Danner
- Tony Torres

OPEN DOORS SUMMER 2024 PILOT SITES

- Coupeville Open Academy
- ESD 101 Next Generation Zone
- ESD 105 Open Doors
- ESD 113 Gravity Learning Center
- ESD 123 TC Futures
- Northwest ESD 189
- Puget Sound ESD 121
- Puyallup-Walker High School
- Seattle Interagency Open Doors
- SkillSource

OPEN DOORS SUMMER 2024 PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

- Benton-Franklin Juvenile Justice
- Build 2 Lead
- Career Path Services
- Chelan County Juvenile Detention Center
- Department of Children, Youth, and Families
- Eco-Stewardship/Washington State University
- ESD 105 Educational Advocates
- Gift from the Heart Food Bank

- Growing Forward
- Habitat for Humanity of Island County
- If You Could Just Save One
- Island County Human Resources
- Lifegate
- Lighthouse Community Center
- Methodist Church
- Mind Your Business
- Morning Star Baptist Church
- Olympia Coffee Roasters
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration Training at Seattle Public Schools
- Puyallup Chamber Foundation
- Puyallup Food Bank
- Puyallup Parks and Rec
- Reddout Wine Consulting and Frichette Wines
- Reign Concept Salon, LLC
- Revive Community Services
- Thurston County Chamber
- Together 105
- Top Notch Driving School
- Touchstone Community Facility
- South Central Washington STEM Network
- Urban League of Seattle
- Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic
- Yes We Can Flaggers
- YMCA

CITATION

Fujita-Conrads, E., Petrokubi, J., Hodara, M., Kennedy, C., Padden, M., & Gowdy, G. (2025). *Washington Open Doors Youth Reengagement Summer Pilot evaluation: Reducing barriers to learning for students.* Education Northwest.

Contents

FIGURES

TABLES

BOX

Introduction

" That's what sets us apart from other institutions. When we say we focus on the whole child, we focus on the whole child. And they get it. Our kids know that we're going to feed them first if they're hungry."

ESD 105 staff member

Reducing barriers to learning can promote positive academic outcomes and overall well-being for youth, especially those most impacted by social, educational, and economic disparities. Young people who have experienced homelessness, foster care, and/or incarceration are disproportionately students of color and students living in poverty; these students face barriers from unsupportive systems, which can impact their engagement and learning (Krauss et al., 2025). Research has shown that basic needs supports (such as mental health services or child care) can reduce barriers to learning; foster positive relationships and mental well-being; and improve attendance, credit completion, and retention and graduation rates for high school-aged students (Moore et al., 2014; Schultz, 2022). In Washington, students in Open Doors reengagement programs have identified lack of access to basic needs services and supports as a contributing factor in their disengagement from high school as well as their decision to reengage through Open Doors (Crumé et al., 2020; Petrokubi et al., 2023).

The Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) oversees Open Doors Youth Reengagement, the "statewide dropout retrieval system" (RCW 28A.175.100) for young people between the ages 16 and 21. Washington House Bill #5187, Sec. 522, appropriated proviso funding for OSPI to conduct a summer pilot with up to 12 Open Doors programs in 2023 and 2024. Summer pilot programs received more money from the state than the usual 10-month school year allocation to provide academic and career programming in July and August, with a focus on students who have experienced institutional education while in juvenile detention or incarcerated—referred to here as "post-resident youth."

Barrier reduction in Open Doors

OSPI recommended that the state legislature allocate barrier reduction funding for Open Doors programs to meet individual students' needs and address issues that inhibited participation in school (OSPI, 2024). Summer pilot barrier reduction funding was allocated on a per-student basis, which gave Open Doors sites the ability to meet the varied needs of their students. These state funds are not typically available to Open Doors programs during the school year.

In addition to summer pilot barrier reduction funding, some Open Doors programs meet students' basic needs through other means, such as donations, partnerships with community-based organizations, or other funding streams.

Overview of this report

OSPI contracted with Education Northwest to evaluate the Open Doors summer pilot. This mixed methods evaluation includes analysis of quantitative data (student-level data from the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System [CEDARS], the Open Doors end-of-year file, and summer pilot data collection spreadsheet) and qualitative data (interviews, focus groups, photo elicitation, and observations) collected with students, staff members, families, and partners during site visits in July and August 2024.

This report draws upon these data to discuss key findings specific to the summer pilot strategy of reducing barriers to learning (box 1).

> ### Box 1. Summer pilot goals to reduce barriers to learning
>
> 1. Sites provide resources to address individual students' barriers to participating in education or work experiences related to their pathway goal.
>
> 2. Sites use summer pilot barrier reduction funds to support individual students with specific academic needs (e.g., testing fees, lab fees, credential costs, work tools), clothing (e.g., work boots, work gloves, dress clothes), food, or transportation (e.g., bus pass, ride share, gas card).

The report is organized by four evaluation issues: programming and partnerships, student participation, student outcomes, and lessons learned and recommendations. We begin by describing the various ways in which Open Doors programs partner and reduce barriers to student participation. Next, we discuss the outcomes of students who received support through summer pilot barrier reduction funding. Finally, the report closes with a description of lessons learned and recommendations.

See Open Doors Reports for reports on the summer pilot strategy to expand summer learning and prioritize service to post-resident youth. More information on the evaluation and data are available in Appendix A at the end of this report.

Key findings

The evaluation team identified seven key findings based on the quantitative and qualitative data collected. Each finding and its supporting data is discussed in detail below the table, grouped by evaluation issue.

Evaluation issue	Summary of key findings for summer 2024
Programming and partnerships	1. Among sites that used barrier reduction funding to support individual students, most funds went to specific academic needs followed by transportation and clothing. 2. Open Doors programs braided together resources and partnerships to support students' individual and collective needs.
Student participation	3. Barrier reduction funds reached many students who are furthest from opportunity, and about half the students supported by barrier reduction funds received them to reach academic goals.
Student outcomes	4. Individual barrier reduction support had a large positive influence on high school completion and career progress.
Lessons learned and recommendations	5. Barrier reduction supports drew students to Open Doors and benefitted learning when the program staff developed strong relationships with students and proactively provided support; however, some needs were still not met. 6. Flexible funding and community partnerships expanded the barrier reduction supports Open Doors programs provide to meet student needs. 7. Programs recommend year-round, flexible barrier reduction funding with clear, consistent guidelines to meet student needs that impede academic progress.

Summer 2024 programming and partnerships for barrier reduction

This section describes key findings related to reducing barriers to learning through program design, management, and partnership. This includes how many programs used the student-level barrier reduction funding available through the pilot, how they spent the funds, and how programs supplemented funds with other resources and partnerships.

FINDING 1.

Among sites that used barrier reduction funding to support individual students, most funds went to academic needs followed by transportation and clothing

We analyzed how Open Doors summer pilot sites used individual-level barrier reduction funding, which students were served by the funding, and the outcomes they experienced. Note that Open Doors sites supplemented barrier reduction funding with donations, other funding streams, and partnerships, which is not reflected in this analysis.

Eight of 10 summer pilot sites used individual-level barrier reduction funding

Eight summer pilot sites used $37,463 to support individual students' specific academic needs, clothing, food and nutrition, and transportation needs. Pilot sites reported providing the following resources to individual students:

Academic. GED testing fees, books and supplies, driver's license fees, commercial driver's license (CDL) fees, CPR certification fees, laptops, Washington food worker card training fees

Clothing. Clothing and hygiene support services, clothing for job interviews, job-related uniforms and gear, clothing for dependents

Food and nutrition. Meals, food, field trip snacks

Transportation. Driver's education and testing fees, gas card, other transportation

Most individual-level barrier reduction funds were spent on academic and transportation needs, supporting students' immediate and long-term goals

The pilot sites spent most of the barrier reduction funds ($14,943) on students' needs related to academics (e.g., testing fees), followed by transportation, clothing, and food and nutrition (figure 1). Because transportation is a persistent challenge for students, particularly in rural areas, Open Doors programs provide money for ride shares and gas cards so students can participate in academic and career-connected learning. Transportation, clothing, and food supports addressed not only immediate basic needs but also future financial stability by enabling students to pursue their academic and career goals through the program.

Figure 1. Dollar amounts spent on individual-level barrier reduction in summer 2024
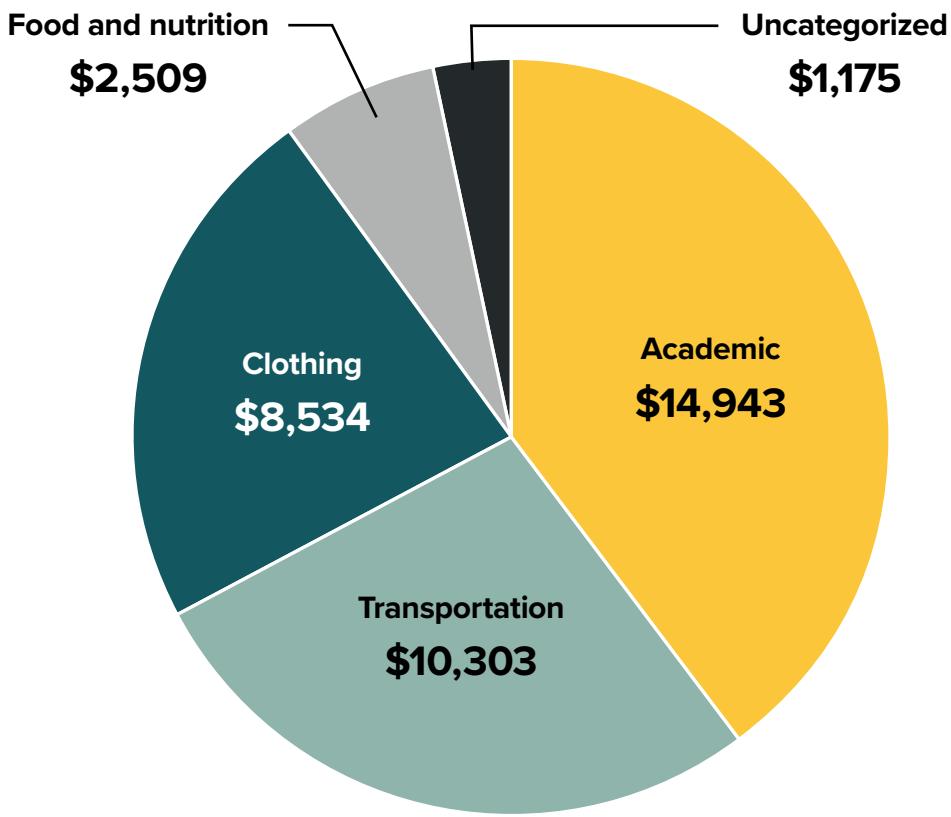
Note: On the summer pilot site data collection sheet, **academic** was defined as testing fees, lab fees, credential costs, necessary tools, required software, culinary knives; **clothing** was defined as work boots, work gloves, shoes, dress shirt; **food and nutrition** was defined as meals and food; and **transportation** was defined as bus passes, ride service, parking permit. Sites could also provide specific write-in responses about what the funds were used for, which is described in the report text above this figure. Data are from the eight pilot sites that reported barrier reduction funds used for individual students.

Example interpretation: Summer pilot sites spent $14,943 on academic needs, $10,303 on transportation, $8,534 on clothing, $2,509 on food and nutrition, and $1,175 on uncategorized barrier reduction resources.

Source: Evaluation team analysis of Open Doors pilot site reporting in summer 2024.

> "She [Open Doors staff member] helps me quite a bit with the food when I can't really afford it. She's been helping with transportation to a summer camp that I volunteer for, and she's helped me out with getting clothes before when I needed them."
>
> Open Doors student

Open Doors programs braided together resources and partnerships to support students' individual and collective needs

Many Open Doors programs provide students with a variety of basic needs supports year round by braiding together resources and partnerships. Staff members emphasized the importance of meeting students' basic needs to facilitate their participation in learning. One staff member said that when Open Doors can reduce barriers and address basic needs, the program moves from just being about academic achievement to a "support hub".

Summer pilot sites drew upon multiple resources to meet the needs of individual students

Basic needs vary among students based on each individual's available resources and unique circumstances. Some common basic needs among high school-aged students include nutritious food, baby supplies, safe and stable housing, and other living expenses. Open Doors programs help students meet these varied individual needs through not only the summer pilot barrier reduction funding, but also funding from other sources such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, donations, and partnerships with community agencies such as Lifegate Outreach and Revive Community Services.

Basic needs support is always critical, but some students especially need support over the summer, when other resources are not readily available.

> "
> If we weren't open for the summer, [students] wouldn't have access to the great food bags that they could grab every now and then because they need a little bit more. They know that we are a safe place to come to if they're having a crisis and that we have resources to give them if they are having a crisis. So, again, being open in the summer allows them to come in if they're having a crisis to get resources that they might need."
>
> Open Doors staff member

> **"** I helped organize these products at Open Doors. I feel proud because this is the stuff that Open Doors has available for students to grab for free!"
>
> Open Doors student

Student photo of supplies for Open Doors participants.

Summer pilot sites showed students how to access supports, such as public benefits, so that they know how to locate resources even after graduation

In addition to providing direct supports, Open Doors staff members help students to locate resources and enroll in public benefits. In doing so, staff members help build skills that students will need beyond the program. Staff members described the importance of enrolling students in public benefits and guiding them to locate community resources so they can continue to meet their basic needs even after they leave Open Doors.

> **"** I take that time to sit and just get to know them and be like, 'What are these barriers? What are you facing?' before we even look at anything else."
>
> Open Doors partner

> "They'll tell us what they need, and we help them find resources. The biggest thing: helping them to find [resources] and being a support person if they need to call someplace. And yes, we have food bags and we know who to connect them to and we offer them support on, like, 'Hey, you need to apply for food stamps.' Or 'You need to apply for AppleCare.' Or 'This is how you do it.' And teaching them that skill while supporting them."
>
> Open Doors staff member

Summer pilot sites wove together funding from multiple sources to meet collective needs

Collective needs include barrier reduction that took place as part of program delivery and was available for all students. For example, some sites used general pilot funds to provide lunch each day of the summer pilot. Others used general pilot funds to rent vans to help with transportation to the summer program, internships, or other field trips. Other programs secured donations of food, clothing, and toiletries and made them available to students as needed during the summer. Programs provided these collective barrier reduction supports in addition to individual-level barrier reduction funds to address students' unique goals and needs.

> "Open Doors, they have facilitated transportation because my husband and I worked. We weren't able to get her to class, so they were able to come pick her up. They were able to bring her home. They fed them lunch so they could be there during the day ...They've just been very supportive. My daughter has been able to speak with adults better than before. And just, again, I can't say enough good things about the program."
>
> Open Doors family member

Student participation in individual-level barrier reduction

This section presents data on the students who received individual-level barrier reduction support through the summer 2024 pilot funding and the types of barrier reduction support they received.

FINDING 3

Barrier reduction funds reached many students who are furthest from opportunity, and about half the students supported by individual barrier reduction funds received them to reach academic goals

Barrier reduction funding supported 17 percent of students across eight sites

Across eight pilot sites, 17 percent of students (105 students total) received support through barrier reduction funds. This represents 10 percent of all summer 2024 students. Previous research found persistent inequities related to which students experience basic needs insecurity and which students access support: Students of color were more likely to experience higher rates of food and housing insecurity, and they also experienced the largest gaps between services needed and services accessed (Riggs & Hodara, 2024). However, in the Open Doors summer pilot, we found that barrier reduction funds

reached many students who are furthest from opportunity. The success factors described in the next section may have contributed to the Open Doors programs effectively reaching and serving students with the highest needs.

The proportion of female students supported by individual barrier reduction funds was higher than the proportion of female students in the overall summer student population

More than half of Open Doors summer pilot students (54%) identified as male. Likewise, male students were more likely to be supported by barrier reduction funding than female students (figure 2). However, when comparing the barrier reduction recipients to the overall summer student population, we found that male students were slightly underrepresented and female students slightly overrepresented. For example, the percentage of female students supported by barrier reduction funding was slightly higher compared to the overall population of female students at the eight sites (47% compared to 43%).

Figure 2. The percentage of female students supported by barrier reduction funding was higher compared to the overall population of female students
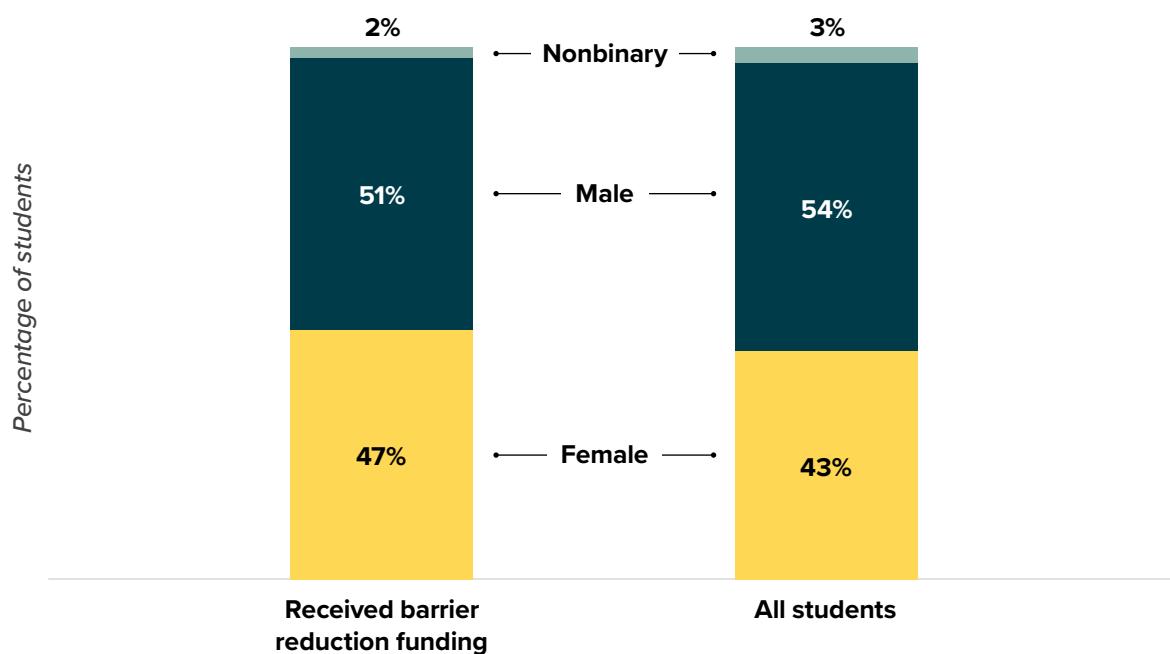
Note: N = 607 for all students and N = 105 for received barrier reduction funding. Data are from the eight pilot sites that reported barrier reduction funds used for individual students.

Example interpretation: Forty-seven percent of students who were supported by barrier reduction funding identified as female. Forty-three percent of all students served by these eight sites during summer 2024 identified as female.

Source: Evaluation team analysis of CEDARS data and pilot site reporting in summer 2024.

Students supported by individual barrier reduction funding were more likely to be American Indian or Alaska Native, Black, or white

Students supported by barrier reduction funding were more likely to be American Indian or Alaska Native, Black, or white compared to all summer students (figure 3). For example, 10 percent of summer students supported by barrier reduction funding identified as Black, while 3 percent of all summer students at the eight sites identified as Black.

Figure 3. Students supported by individual barrier reduction funding were more likely to be American Indian or Alaska Native, Black, or white

● **Received barrier reduction funding**   ▲ **All students**
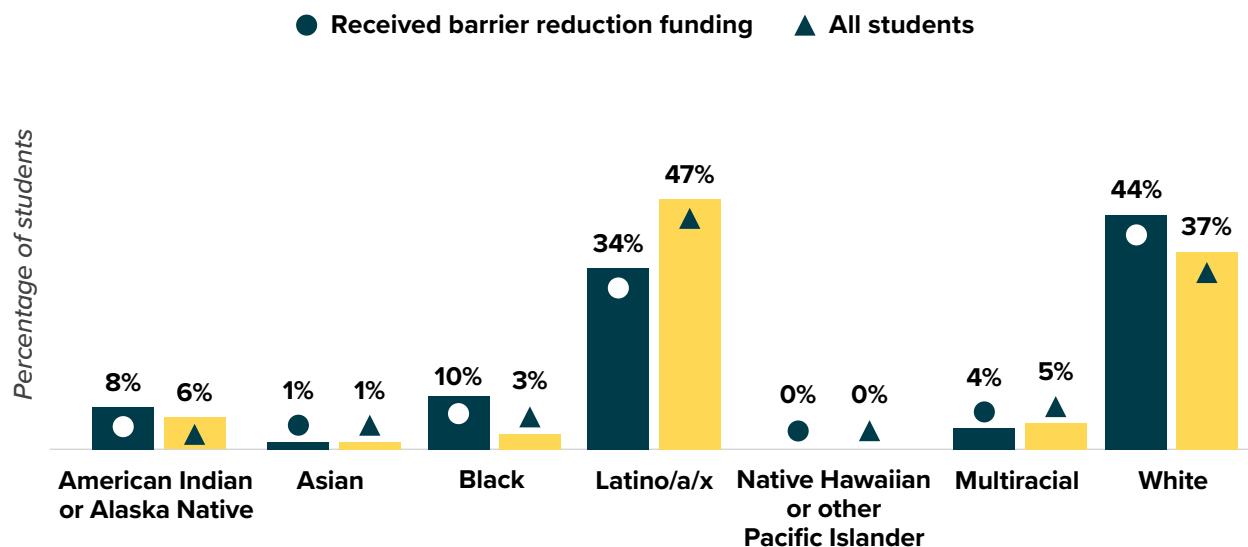
Note: N = 607 for all students and N = 105 for received barrier reduction funding. Data are from the eight pilot sites that reported barrier reduction funds used for individual students.

Example interpretation: Eight percent of students supported by barrier reduction funding in summer 2024 identified as American Indian or Alaska Native. Six percent of all students served by these eight sites during summer 2024 identified as American Indian or Alaska Native.

Source: Evaluation team analysis of CEDARS data and pilot site reporting in summer 2024.

Students supported by individual barrier reduction funds were more likely to be post-resident youth

Basic needs support is particularly important for young people who have experienced incarceration or detention. For example, an evaluation of the impact of basic needs support for incarcerated youth found that access to reentry services reduced recidivism (Calleja et al., 2016). Furthermore, the Washington State Legislature issued the summer pilot funding to ensure that post-resident youth were prioritized in planning and services. Open Doors students supported by barrier reduction funds in summer 2024 were more likely to be post-resident youth (23%) compared to all summer students at the eight sites (16%; figure 4). Students supported by barrier reduction funds were also more likely to have had an individualized education program (IEP) at some point in their education.

Figure 4. Students supported by individual barrier reduction funds in summer 2024 were more likely to be post-resident youth and have had an individualized education program (IEP)

● Received barrier reduction funding ▲ All students

Percentage of students

	Post-resident youth	Experienced homelessness	Participated in migrant education	Had an IEP	Eligible for FRPL	Classified as English learner
Received barrier reduction funding	23%	31%	9%	29%	89%	16%
All students	16%	30%	14%	23%	91%	25%
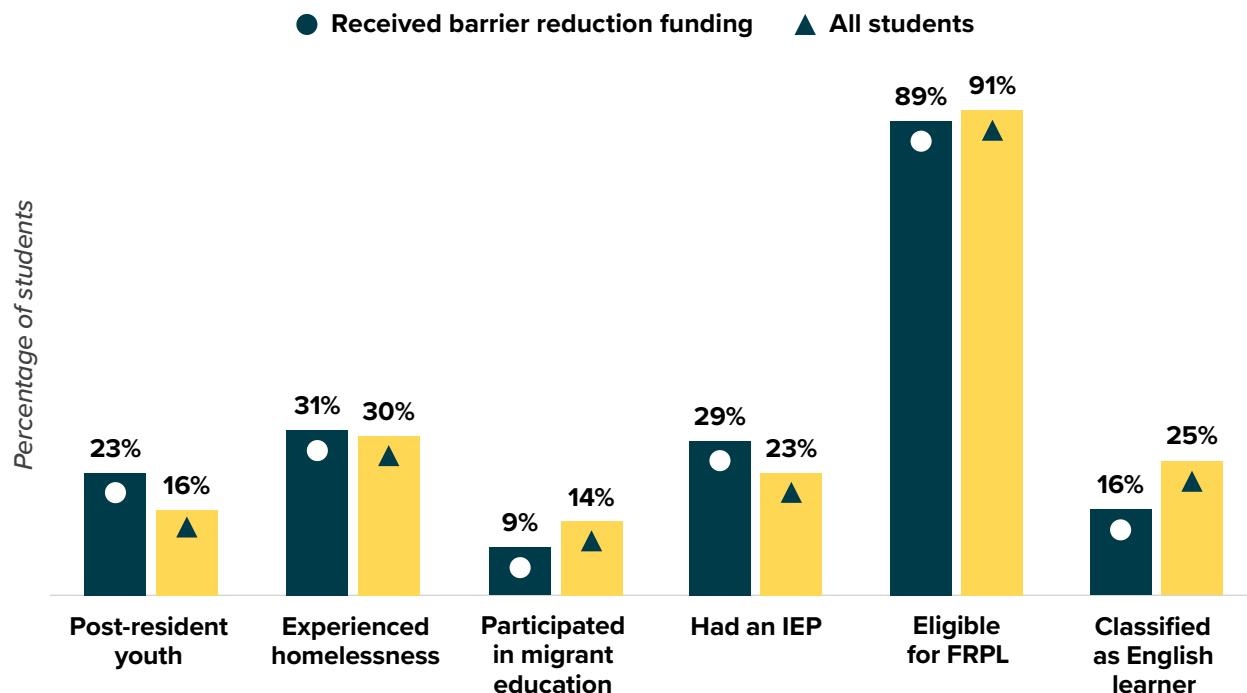
FRPL = free or reduced-price lunch.

Note: N = 607 for all students and N = 105 for received barrier reduction funding. Data are from the eight pilot sites that reported using barrier reduction funds for individual students.

Example interpretation: Twenty-three percent of students supported by barrier reduction funding in summer 2024 identified as a post-resident youth. Sixteen percent of all students served by these eight sites in summer 2024 identified as post-resident youth.

Source: Evaluation team analysis of CEDARS data and pilot site reporting in summer 2024. Post-resident youth data self-reported by sites; all other school experiences from CEDARS.

About half of students supported by individual barrier reduction funds received them for direct academic support

Almost half of students received barrier reduction funds for specific academic needs directly related to their Open Doors pathway goal of GED completion, high school completion, or college or career (48%; figure 5). Again, this means that barrier reduction was commonly used to support students' future financial stability by covering testing and training fees related to their pathway goals. Forty-two percent of students supported by barrier reduction funds received food, 36 percent received clothing, and 32 percent received transportation supports.

Most students who received the barrier reduction funds (61%, or 64 students) used them for only one type of support. One in five students received the funds for two types of resources, most commonly academic and food. Notably, almost one in five students supported by barrier reduction funds received resources in all four areas of need: academic, food, clothing, and transportation.

Figure 5. About half of students supported by individual barrier reduction funds used them for academic resources to support progress toward their pathway goal
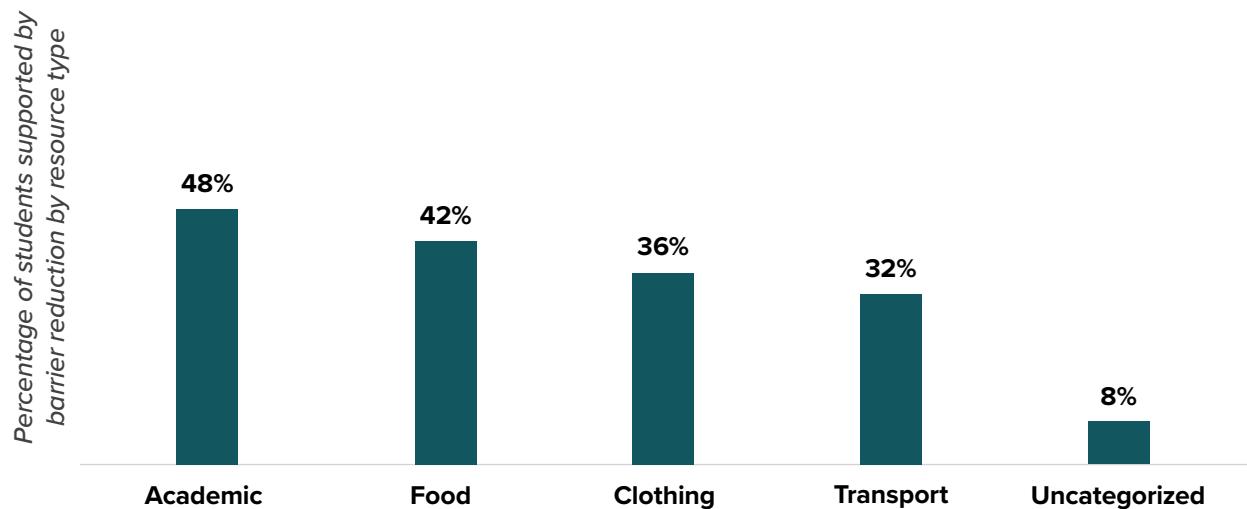
Note: N = 105. Data are from the eight pilot sites that reported barrier reduction funds used for individual students. On the summer pilot site data collection sheet, **academic** was defined as testing fees, lab fees, credential costs, necessary tools, required software, culinary knives; **clothing** was defined as work boots, work gloves, shoes, dress shirt; **food and nutrition** was defined as meals and food; and **transportation** was defined as bus passes, ride service, parking permit.

Example interpretation: Forty-eight percent of students supported by barrier reduction funding in summer 2024 received the funding for academic resources.

Source: Evaluation team analysis of pilot site reporting in summer 2024.

Outcomes for students supported through barrier reduction funds

FINDING 4

Individual barrier reduction support had a large positive influence on high school completion and career progress

Research in postsecondary settings has shown that supports that address college students' immediate well-being—such as food, housing, child care, transportation, mental and physical health care, and other basic needs—are associated with positive outcomes such as improved retention, credential completion, and course credit completion (Daugherty & Berglund, 2018; Riggs & Hodara, 2024; Valentine & Deal, 2023). Similarly, for high school-aged students, emerging evidence shows that basic needs support improves attendance, credit completion, and retention rates (Moore et al., 2014). For young people with limited financial resources, workforce and job training must be combined with investment in financial capital and immediate stability (Cedeño et al., 2021).

Reducing barriers to accessing career credentials promotes academic progress and future financial stability

Open Doors staff members and students described both the short- and long-term benefits of using barrier reduction funds to help students gain career credentials such as CDL training, driver's licenses, and food handler cards. When programs reduce barriers to learning by paying for testing fees, students can make academic progress on their career goals and pathways while gaining valuable career credentials that support their continued engagement and future financial stability.

> "We had a student who we were able to put through CDL training. This summer, we were able to pay for CDL training for him, and he was able to work around that with his schedule. He still stays in contact and checks in with us regularly. Just today he sent me a picture that he's doing his driving training."
>
> Open Doors staff member

> "I have a youth who it took him a year and a half to get his Washington state ID. I talked with the guardian about five times trying to get him an ID. He just got it on Friday, after a year and a half. Not having a Washington state ID, he couldn't do driver's education, he couldn't get a job."
>
> Open Doors staff member

Students supported by individual-level barrier reduction funding were substantially more likely to earn an indicator of academic progress in summer 2024

Fifty-seven percent of students supported by barrier reduction funding earned at least one indicator of academic progress (IAP) in summer 2024, while 38 percent of students who did not receive the funding earned at least one IAP (figure 6). Barrier reduction funding increased the likelihood of earning an IAP through facilitating career progress and earning a career credential. As noted, barrier reduction funding was often used to cover testing, training, and license fees that directly supported students in reaching their Open Doors pathway goal. Thirteen percent of students supported by barrier reduction funding earned an IAP related to career progress and 21 percent earned a career credential compared to 1 percent and 0 percent, respectively, of their peers at the eight sites that did not receive the funding. Further, students supported by barrier reduction funding were more likely to earn a GED (7% compared to 3%).

Figure 6. Students supported by individual barrier reduction funding were more likely to earn an IAP in summer 2024, particularly related to career progress and credentials
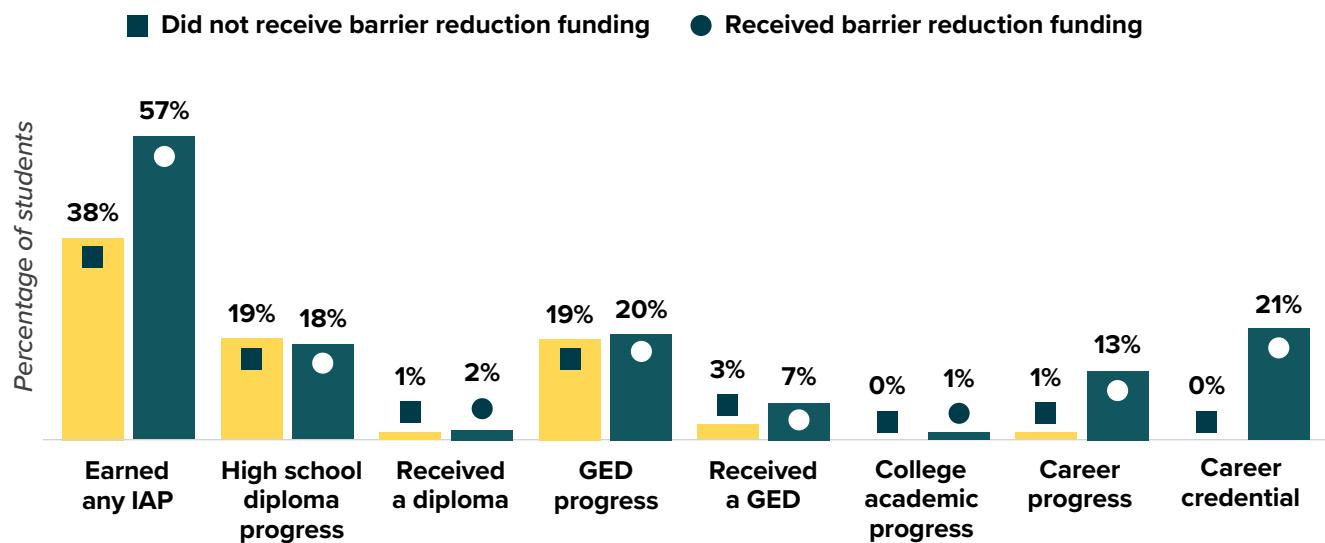
■ **Did not receive barrier reduction funding**   ● **Received barrier reduction funding**

IAP = indicator of academic progress.

Note: N = 502 for did not receive barrier reduction funding and N = 105 for received barrier reduction funding. Data are from the eight pilot sites that reported barrier reduction funds used for individual students. See table A1 in the appendix for the IAPs included in each category.

Example interpretation: Fifty-seven percent of students supported by individual barrier reduction funding in summer 2024 earned any IAP. Thirty-eight percent of students at these eight sites that were not supported by individual barrier reduction funding in summer 2024 earned any IAP.

Source: Evaluation team analysis of CEDARS data and pilot site reporting in summer 2024.

Students supported by barrier reduction funding in the summer continued to be more likely to earn IAPs related to career progress in fall 2024

Students who supported through barrier reduction funding demonstrated continued academic progress into fall 2024, highlighting the sustained impact of the support—even as initial IAP gains leveled out compared to their peers. Fifty-three percent of students supported by summer barrier reduction funding earned at least one IAP in fall 2024 compared to 62 percent of students who did not receive the funds (figure 7). Even without continued funding, students who were supported by individual barrier reduction funds in the summer were more likely to make career progress in the fall compared to their peers who did not receive the funding in the summer.

Figure 7. Students supported by barrier reduction funding in the summer continued to be more likely to earn IAPs related to career progress in fall 2024

■ Did not receive barrier reduction funding   ● Received barrier reduction funding
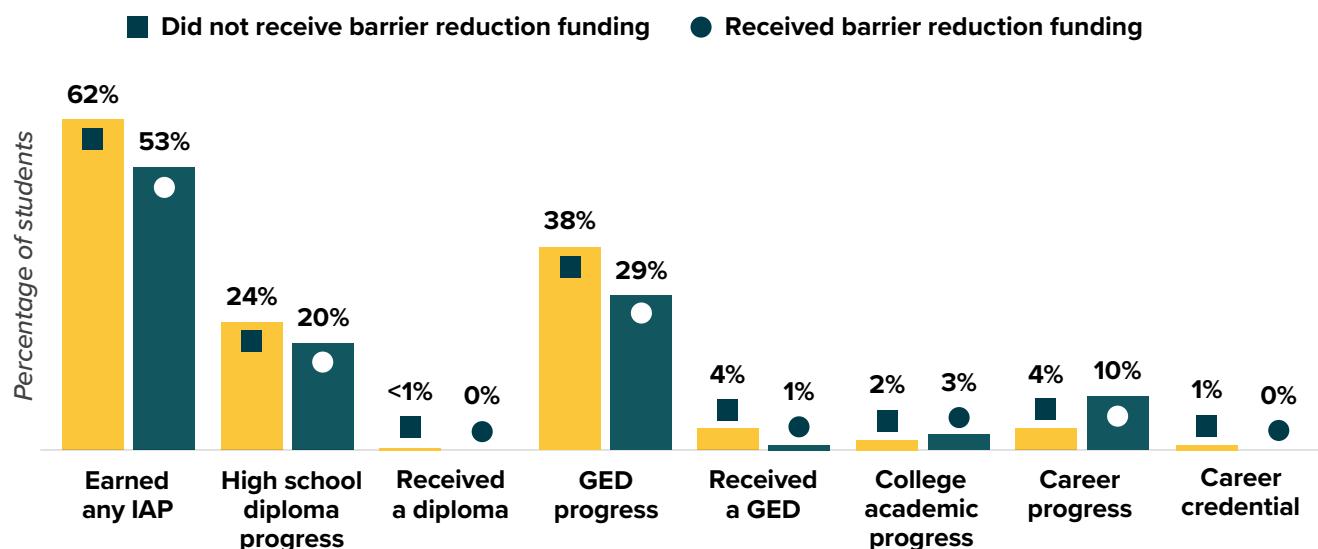
IAP = indicator of academic progress.

Note: N = 502 for did not receive barrier reduction funding and N = 105 for received barrier reduction funding. Data are from the eight pilot sites that reported barrier reduction funds used for individual students. See table A1 in the appendix for the IAPs included in each category.

Example interpretation: Ten percent of students supported by barrier reduction funding in the summer 2024 made career progress in fall 2024. Four percent of students at the eight sites who were not supported by barrier reduction funding in summer 2024 made career progress in fall 2024.

Source: Evaluation team analysis of CEDARS data and pilot site reporting in summer and fall 2024.

Barrier reduction funding had a large, positive, and statistically significant relationship with increased likelihood of earning a career credential, earning any IAP, earning a GED, and making career progress

As described earlier, students supported by individual barrier reduction funding through the summer pilot had different identities and school experiences compared to the overall population of students at the eight sites, which could drive differences in academic progress and completion. To isolate the contribution of barrier reduction funding, we estimated statistical models that account for which Open Doors summer pilot the students attended as well as students' identities and school experiences. Regardless of the pilot site, student identities, and school experiences, barrier reduction funding had a large, positive, and statistically significant relationship with increased likelihood of earning a career credential, earning any IAP, earning a GED, and making career progress (figure 8). Specifically, receiving barrier reduction funding in the summer was related to a 25 percentage-point increase in earning a career credential, a 24 percentage-point increase in earning an IAP, and a 5 percentage-point increase in earning a GED in summer 2024. Receiving barrier reduction funding in the summer was also related to a 6 percentage-point increase in making career progress in fall 2024.

Figure 8. Regardless of Open Doors program, student identities, and school experiences, receiving barrier reduction funding increased the likelihood of earning a career credential, IAP, or GED in summer 2024 and making career progress in fall 2024

+25 pp	+24 pp	+5 pp	+6 pp
Career credential IAP	Any IAP	Earned GED	Career progress IAP
Summer 2024		*Fall 2024*	
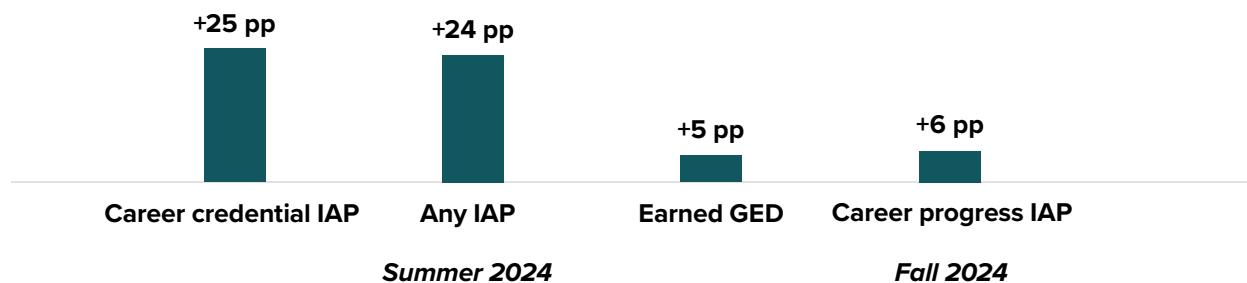
IAP = indicator of academic progress. pp = percentage point.

Note: N = 607. Data are from the eight pilot sites that reported barrier reduction funds used for individual students. Vertical bars present statistically significant coefficients ($p < 0.05$) from ordinary least squares regression analyses that examine the relationship between receiving barrier reduction funds and student outcomes in summer 2024 and fall 2024. The bars represent the change in the probability that a student achieves the outcome, after adjusting for differences attributed to student identities, school experiences, and program attended. Students who did not receive barrier reduction funds are the reference category.

Example interpretation: Barrier reduction funding in summer 2024 is associated with a 25 percentage-point increase in the likelihood of earning a career credential.

Source: Evaluation team analysis of CEDARS data and pilot site reporting in summer and fall 2024.

Lessons learned and recommendations for reducing barriers to learning for Open Doors students

In this section, we present insights and lessons learned about barrier reduction, both in the summer 2024 pilot and during the school year.

FINDING 5

Barrier reduction supports drew students to Open Doors and benefitted learning when the program staff developed strong relationships with students and proactively provided support; however, some needs were still not met

Barrier reduction funds drew students to engage in Open Doors, and basic needs must be addressed before learning can happen

Open Doors providers found that offering barrier reduction support and career-connected learning opportunities motivated students to join and persist in the program. Students described how the basic needs supports motivated them to come to school and stay engaged over the summer. Barrier reduction

support, as well as compensation for summer internships, can be a way to engage students and persuade them to finish their diploma or take the GED. Staff members also shared that barrier reduction and basic needs supports are the reasons why some students attended the program regularly.

> "Especially if something was holding you back from being able to get here. For example, the gas cards: If you didn't have the money to pay for gas to get here, it stunts you from being able to come. Someone there [at Open Doors] giving you that support of, 'Oh well we can help you get here. You just have to want to be here.' It gives you even more reason to come.'"
>
> Open Doors student

Open Doors staff members recognize that students' basic needs, such as food, housing, and transportation, must be met before learning can happen. In some cases, students must work to meet their basic needs in addition to attending Open Doors. Program staff partnered with students to find employment that accommodated their school schedules. For example, Open Doors staff members built partnerships with community employers to help students find job opportunities. They also offered students paid work experiences at program sites, such as proctoring GED tests or office work. Before students begin coursework, Open Doors staff members often meet with students to ask what needs to be addressed to support their learning.

> "Let's just say a student dropped out of school and they don't know what they want to do because they have a situation that needs to be addressed now. They need a phone. They need food. They need a car. And so, once these things get addressed and we're mentoring these guys, we're actually in their ear now and we can encourage them to go get their GED or get back in school because they're listening and they actually can see, 'Hey, there's another way. There is some hope now. Let me get my education as far as that's concerned so I can further what I'm doing now.'"
>
> Open Doors staff member

> "When I first came, they helped me get a job. So yeah, I was working for a little bit and then they helped with child care and everything."
>
> Open Doors student

Successful use of barrier reduction funds requires trusting relationships and proactive offers of support; over time barrier reduction supports can also build trust between program staff and students

For many reasons, students may not be transparent about their needs right away. To understand each student and the barriers they face, staff members need time to invest in building a trusting relationship with the young person. For example, one staff member described the various reasons why a student may not be comfortable sharing their individual needs.

> "All of the kids, after a while of getting to know those students, they all have certain barriers that dollars could have addressed. When you have kids that are excited about participating in an internship or a work-based learning experience where they are going to be getting monetary benefits for participating, the barriers in their lives are not that visible because their excitement of engagement is high. But as you move forward and the case manager continues to do the work, those barriers begin to show. A lot of times the Open Doors students … may not exhibit the vulnerabilities up front that you would expect because there may be that shame part."
>
> Open Doors staff member

Staff members said that barrier reduction support was more successful when they provided it proactively instead of waiting for students to approach them. Asking for support can be difficult or make students feel vulnerable. For example, students may feel embarrassed to say that they do not have enough to eat at home. Some staff members said they proactively provide basic needs supports by putting food out or providing laundry, clothing, and other hygiene products.

> "When the kid comes in and sits down and starts crying and says, 'I'm hungry' … those kinds of things. One of the things I like about our model, though, is that it's very self-driven, and we try to make sure that people have their needs met without having to ask a lot. It's hard. I mean, can you imagine walking into a building and telling somebody you're hungry, don't have any food at home? So we have food out, and in our laundry room, we have clothing out. They don't have to ask for it. They just go in and take what they need."
>
> Open Doors staff member

Staff members shared that they build trust with students when they follow through with providing barrier reduction supports such as transportation, food, housing referrals, or other resources.

> " The trust factor. Kids are calling us and saying, 'Hey, this is what I need.' Food, diapers. Just going above and beyond. Our kids are saying, 'Hey, I need a little more help,' which … it's a sign of engagement, a sign that what we're doing is working for kids."
>
> Open Doors staff member

In interviews, we asked Open Doors programs what areas of need could be addressed through barrier reduction funds to better support young people. One-third of the interviewees mentioned housing. Future money for housing vouchers and other methods of housing stabilization could help keep students engaged in programming.

Even with barrier reduction funding, some students' needs are not met

While barrier reduction funding helped students meet immediate financial needs, some needs were still not met. Barrier reduction funding can support students' engagement in Open Doors, but it does not address the root causes for the need. For example, even with the flexible funding, program staff members said that food and transportation remained persistent challenges for students. One summer pilot staff member said, "Transportation is always going to be a big, big issue. It's very expensive for us to provide it. It is also so important." In addition, capacity constraints within the community make it challenging for program staff members to provide students with needed supports. Staff members particularly mentioned needing more special education services in the summer and mental health supports in the community.

Special education in the summer. Program staff members reflected on challenges supporting students due to a lack of special education services from the district during the summer. Some staff members recommended that OSPI provide additional funding for special education services or support districts in providing those services during the summer.

Mental health supports. Program staff members also mentioned difficulties related to students' mental health. Some programs have therapists, but their capacity is limited, and they need more support. One staff member said, "The more help we could get, the better." Program staff members recommended more mental health funding from the state.

Flexible funding and community partnerships expanded the barrier reduction supports Open Doors programs provide to meet student needs

Pilot sites could offer a wider range of barrier reduction support in the summer than the school year due to flexible funding focused on individual youth needs

Across sites, staff members said that the flexible barrier reduction funds were a key success factor from the summer pilot. During the school year the state often sets limitations on how programs can use barrier reduction funds. One staff member said, "Throughout the year, our hands are tied. We wish we could, but they call it gifting, so we can't." Another staff member said the summer pilot was the first time that Open Doors programs could spend money directly on students.

> "
> Some of those federal regulations around our partnerships, what they can and can't spend their money on, it's very prescriptive. So we have to figure out ways to get around some of that stuff. We haven't ever had barrier reduction dollars where we can just say, 'Hey, I need to pay for this particular person's ID.' … So this is the first time we've ever really been able to spend money directly on our students.'"
>
> Open Doors staff member

Program staff members benefited from being able to use the funds on whatever students needed to support their learning and growth, including IDs, documents, or cosmetics for job interviews. In addition, program staff members used cash for basic needs to incentivize participation in summer programming, for example, providing a gift card when a student passes a GED test.

Open Doors summer pilot sites were strategic about when to use barrier reduction funds and when to leverage existing community resources

Open Doors sites combined the flexible barrier reduction funding with support from community-based organizations, public benefits, and other existing community resources. Before the summer pilot, sites often partnered with community-based organizations to provide barrier reduction supports that students need but sites cannot purchase due to federal and state funding restrictions. During the summer pilot, sites continued to connect with their community-based partners. For example, one staff member said they met students' basic needs by first working with their partners, then using the OSPI barrier reduction funds. Others noted that the flexible summer pilot funding reduced the burden on community-based partners and helped to ensure that partners were not "tapped out" over the summer.

> **"** Some of it we do normally, but we are dependent on community organizations to provide it. So the barrier reduction [funds] helped to mitigate that, since we kind of tapped them all out throughout the year. But then I think the gas cards and stuff, that's all brand new. It actually triggered lots of conversations in our district office because it's not a typical thing that a school would do. And we pushed a boundary a little bit with it."
>
> Open Doors staff member

FINDING 7

Programs recommend year-round, flexible barrier reduction funding with clear, consistent guidelines to meet students' needs that impede academic progress

Programs want clear, consistent guidelines on use of funds

Open Doors staff members appreciated the flexible guidelines on how barrier reductions funds could be used. At the same time, staff members wanted "true clarity." Some were nervous about whether their expenditures aligned with the guidelines. In addition, sites would like more explicit guidance on allowable barrier reduction expenses from OSPI to share with districts and educational service district partners. Staff members said it was difficult to understand which expenses were allowed and which were not. They also mentioned challenges communicating that information to OSPI and districts in order to get expenses approved.

Programs recommend year-round, flexible barrier reduction funds

Staff members were grateful for the flexible funding in the summer and also mentioned the challenges they face during the school year when this type of support is not available. At the same time, the evaluation found that students supported through barrier reduction funds in the summer continued to earn more IAPs related to career progress in the fall than students who did not receive funding. Year-round, flexible barrier reduction funding could support continued academic progress. Open Doors staff members recommended that the Washington State Legislature provide flexible barrier reduction funding throughout the year to better support students' needs. Researchers recommend that state funding to districts should strike a balance between ensuring that funds are well spent and maximizing flexibility to meet local students' needs (Asuncion-Reed, 2019).

> " For students to be able to come in and stay engaged over the summer, we have students that come for food. We have students that come for support. We have students that are pregnant. We have students with babies. We have students that are homeless. So, to have a place even just to come and be and talk, and that's huge to be able to do some barrier reduction ... The barrier reduction is huge in the summer. I wish we had it all year long."

<div align="right">Open Doors staff member</div>

> "It [individual barrier reduction funding] is something that would be amazing to have the opportunity to have throughout the school year ... Providing food is very limited on what we can do. So having those barrier reduction funds for the summer and being able to say, 'Okay. This is what we want to do,' and as long as we could provide a clear line of what it is for, they were like, 'Yes.' I mean, that was amazing. If we could do that during the school year, I think we could increase our outcomes exponentially and help students really make a difference in their lives."

<div align="right">Open Doors staff member</div>

Conclusion

Findings from the Open Doors Summer Pilot demonstrate barrier reduction fundings supports student academic and career progress. Barrier reduction funds supported individual students with specific academic needs, like testing fees or credential costs, clothing, food, and transportation, including bus passes, ride shares, and gas cards. Reducing student barriers to learning can promote positive academic outcomes, foster healthy relationships, and improve mental well-being, particularly for students impacted by social, educational, and economic disparities (Krauss et al., 2025; Moore et al., 2024; Schultz, 2022).

When we analyzed which students received support from barrier reduction funding and their outcomes, we found a large positive influence, particularly from students furthest from opportunity. In reducing students' barriers, programs identified the importance of strong relationships, building trust, and proactively providing support. Open Doors programs also found success in weaving together support from partnership, donations, and other funding streams to meet students' diverse needs. Our findings suggest that, when provided the resources and funding to meet students' individual needs, students make academic and career progress. Moving forward, programs recommend that the state provide year-round, flexible funding with clear, consistent guidelines to meet students' needs.

References

Asuncion-Reed, R. (2019, December). Five things to advance equity in state funding systems. *Education Trust*. https://edtrust.org/rti/5-things-to-advance-equity-in-state-funding-systems/

Calleja, N. A., Dadah, A., Fisher, J., & Fernandez, M. (2016). Reducing juvenile recidivism through specialized reentry services: A Second Chance Act project. *OJJDP Journal of Juvenile Justice 5*(2), 1–11.

Cedeño, D., Lannin, D. G., Russell, L., Yazedjian, A., Kanter, J. B., & Mimnaugh, S. (2021). The effectiveness of a financial literacy and job-readiness curriculum for youth from low-income households. *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education, 20*(2), 1–19.

Crumé, H. J., Martinez, D., Yohalem, N., & Yoshizumi, A. (2020). Creating paths for change: Understanding student disengagement and reengagement. Community Center for Education Results. https://roadmapproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Creating-Paths-for-Change-Understanding-Student-Disengagement-and-Reengagement.pdf

Daugherty, L., & Berglund, T. (2018). *A one-stop approach to supporting the nonacademic needs of community college students: An evaluation of Single Stop's impact in North Carolina.* RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2767.html

Krauss, S. M., Day, M., Ferber, T., & Wallis, D. (2025, January). *A landscape scan of research on the K–12 education of young people in the United States who experience foster care, incarceration, and/or homelessness.* Annie E. Casey Foundation. https://www.stephaniemaliakrauss.com/_files/ugd/fd22f9_6d55d52dff66460b8e351e5ccf317b40.pdf

Moore, K. A., Caal, S., Carney, R., Lippman, L., Li, W., Muenks, K., Murphey, D., Princiotta, D., Ramirez, A. N., & Rojas, A. (2014). Making the grade: Assessing the evidence for integrated student supports. *Child Trends*. https://www.childtrends.org/publications/making-the-grade-assessing-the-evidence-for-integrated-student-supports/

Petrokubi, J., Cooley, S., Fujita-Conrads, E., Hodara, M., & McClennan, D. (2023). *Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative summary report.* Education Northwest. https://ospi.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/2023-12/cpri_summary_report.pdf

Riggs, S., & Hodara, M. (2024). *Exploring the reach and impact of basic needs services at postsecondary institutions: Learnings from a multi-state evaluation in 2020–21 and 2021–22.* Education Northwest. https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ecme-bni-evaluation-report-two-508c.pdf

Schultz, K. (2022). Effects of food insecurity on college students' mental health during the coronavirus pandemic. *Schultz-Werth Award Papers.* 28. https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/schultz-werth/28

Valentine, J. L., & Deal, S. A. (2023). *Addressing food insecurity on campus: Connecting students with sustained basic needs supports to improve academic outcomes.* DVP-PRAXIS LTD.

Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2024). *Overcoming barriers to student success through integrated supports: Barrier reductions.* https://ospi.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/2024-02/barrierreduction_opendoors2024.pdf

Appendix A

Evaluation methods

Education Northwest developed the evaluation questions and approach in collaboration with OSPI and an advisory committee of student and staff teams from five pilot sites. The advisory committee was engaged four times over the course of the project and provided feedback on the evaluation design, making meaning of the findings, and reporting. The following evaluation questions guided the development of interview and focus group protocols and data analysis:

- What happens in the summer pilot programs?
- Who participates in the summer pilot programs?
- Which students benefit from summer programming, and how do they benefit?

Prior to data collection, the Education Northwest Institutional Review Board conducted a full review and approved the project.

Qualitative data collection

To answer the research questions, Education Northwest conducted site visits at the 10 Open Doors sites that received summer pilot funding in July and August 2024. The site visits included interviews and focus groups with Open Doors staff members, community partners, students, and families. Nine program leaders also participated in brief follow-up interviews in spring 2025. In total, Education Northwest researchers spoke to 120 individuals across 31 interviews and focus groups (table A1).

Table A1. Site visit participants

Participants	Number of individual participants	Number of programs represented
Open Doors staff members	43	10
Community partners	20	9
Students	51	10
Families	6	2

Student focus groups

Education Northwest conducted two types of student focus groups at the summer pilot sites. At eight of the sites, Education Northwest facilitated a focus group to discuss students' experiences with Open Doors, the opportunities and support provided by the program, and students' goals and recommendations for the program. A total of 38 students participated. At the remaining two summer pilot sites, Education Northwest adapted photovoice methods for the student focus groups. Prior to the focus group, students were asked to watch a 15-minute video on photovoice developed by Education Northwest. Then,

students took photos in response to a series of prompts about their experience in the summer program and shared the photographs with the research team. During site visits, researchers displayed printed copies of the students' photos around the room and used the photos to guide a discussion with students about the benefits, challenges, and opportunities for Open Doors summer programming. A total of 13 students participated in the photovoice focus groups.

After each focus group, Education Northwest distributed a demographic survey to participants. Forty students agreed to take the survey. Young people who participated in the focus groups and the survey were more likely to be female, be people of color, and have experienced homelessness compared with the overall summer pilot student population. Twenty percent of students experienced homelessness and 15 percent experienced foster care, while 13 percent were caring for dependents and 15 percent were caring for other family members. About one-quarter of participants identified as LGBTQIA.

Observations

Education Northwest conducted observations of various program activities during six site visits to provide a broader understanding of program practices and youth experiences. Program activities were observed using a semi-structured protocol designed to collect data specific to the key strategies identified in OSPI guidance for the summer pilot and the Open Doors theory of action.

Analysis

After data collection, the interviews and focus group recordings were transcribed for analysis using Atlas. Ti software. The first cycle of coding used an established a-priori coding framework developed using findings from the previous Open Doors Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative. Coding was also conducted inductively to allow themes to emerge that were not captured in the existing framework. Researchers then applied a process of thematic coding to search for commonalities that "hang together" across participant data. The internal validity of results was strengthened by triangulating multiple data sources from various perspectives, including the program staff, partners, families, and students, as well as through member checks of preliminary analyses. Multiple data sources allowed for rich descriptions to support the transferability and potential extrapolations for other Open Doors and youth reengagement programs.

Quantitative data

This evaluation established a data-sharing agreement with OSPI to collect and use student-level administrative data for the purposes of this evaluation. OSPI deidentified student-level administrative data files from the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS), which is OSPI's longitudinal data warehouse, and student-level data collected by the summer pilot sites. OSPI created a common research ID before transferring the data to Education Northwest for the purposes of the evaluation. To address evaluation questions related to student participation and outcomes, as well specific questions about post-resident youth and barrier reduction funding, the evaluation team cleaned, linked, and analyzed the student-level administrative data using descriptive and regression approaches.

Appendix B

The table lists which IAPs were included in each category. We only list the IAPs that were earned by summer participants.

Table B1. Categorization of indicators of academic progress

IAP category	Indicators of Academic Progress (IAPs)
High school diploma progress	a. Earns at minimum a 0.25 high school credit. e. Passes one or more tests or benchmarks that would satisfy the state board of education's graduation requirements as provided in chapter 180-51 WAC. h. Successfully completes a grade level curriculum in a core academic subject that does not earn high school or college credit.
GED progress	f. Passes one or more high school equivalency certificate measures (each measure may only be claimed once per enrolled student), or other state assessment. g. Makes a significant gain in a core academic subject based on the assessment tool's determination of significant gain (may be claimed multiple times in a year per enrolled student).
College academic progress	i. Successfully completes college readiness course work with documentation of competency attainment. l. Enrolls in a college level class for the first time (limited to be claimed once per enrolled student)
Career progress	j. Successfully completes job search and job retention course work with documentation of competency attainment k. Successfully completes a paid or unpaid cooperative work-based learning experience of at least 45 hours. This experience must meet the requirements of WAC 392-410-315(2).
Career credential	d. Receives an industry recognized certificate of completion of training or licensing received after completion of a program requiring at least 40 hours of instruction. o. Successfully completes a series of short-term industry recognized certificates equaling at least 40 hours.

Source: Indicators of academic progress are defined here: https://ospi.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/2023-10/iap_manual_final.pdf

Legal Notice