

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From July 1995 through September 2001, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and The Ford Foundation (Ford) operated a demonstration of the Quantum Opportunity Program (QOP). QOP offered intensive and comprehensive services to help at-risk youth graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education or training. The QOP demonstration included several features of Workforce Investment Act (WIA) youth programs, and findings from the demonstration might provide some insight about the implementation challenges that such WIA programs will encounter and the potential effectiveness of those programs.

The QOP demonstration targeted youth with low grades entering high schools with high dropout rates. Randomly selected eligible youth were enrolled in QOP and served even if they transferred to other schools, dropped out of school, became incarcerated, or became inactive in QOP for a long time. QOP's primary goals were to increase the rates of high school graduation and enrollment in postsecondary education or training. Its secondary goals were to improve high school grades and achievement test scores and to reduce risky behaviors, such as substance abuse, crime, and teen parenting.

QOP was mainly an after-school program providing case management and mentoring, supplemental education, developmental activities, community service activities, supportive services, and financial incentives. These services were provided year-round for five years to enrollees who had not graduated from high school, and were designed to be comprehensive enough to address all barriers to success and to be intensive. The program model specified roughly 15 to 25 enrollees per case manager, and it prescribed an annual participation goal of 750 hours for each enrollee who had not graduated. From graduation to the end of the demonstration, enrollees who had graduated received limited services—some mentoring and assistance with enrolling in postsecondary education or training.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) in seven sites operated QOP demonstration programs. Five sites (Cleveland, Fort Worth, Houston, Memphis, and Washington, D.C.) were funded by DOL. Four of the five served 100 youth each, and the Washington, D.C., site served 80 youth. The other two sites (Philadelphia and Yakima) served 50 youth each with funding from Ford. DOL has also funded an evaluation of the QOP demonstration.

Evaluation Design

Through annual site visits, annual QOP conferences, and conference calls with QOP staff, we assessed how well the CBOs in the QOP demonstration implemented the program model. From information provided by QOP staff, we also measured how much QOP cost and how much enrollees participated in QOP. To estimate QOP's impacts on high school performance and graduation, postsecondary education or training, and risky behaviors, we conducted two surveys, administered achievement tests in reading and mathematics, and collected high school transcripts for a group of youth who were enrolled in QOP and a group of statistically identical youth—the control group—who were not allowed to participate in QOP. We formed the QOP and control groups at

the start of the demonstration by randomly assigning each of the nearly 1,100 youth eligible for the program to one group or the other.

How Well Was QOP Implemented?

Every site implemented a version of QOP. However, two sites implemented a version of QOP that deviated substantially from the program model, and the other five sites implemented versions that deviated moderately from the model. With the exception of the Philadelphia site where the program was operated by the CBO that helped to design the QOP model, local CBOs found implementing QOP difficult, primarily because QOP was substantially more comprehensive, intensive, and complex than their traditional programs. Other implementation findings include the following:

- Most sites implemented the mentoring component as prescribed by the QOP model. Case managers developed deep personal relationships with the 40 to 60 percent of enrollees who attended some program activities regularly and addressed a wide range of barriers facing those youth. QOP's policy of providing access to services regardless of the enrollee's behaviors (that is, becoming incarcerated, moving to another community, dropping out of high school) was well implemented.
- Few sites implemented the education component as prescribed. In most sites, tutors with education backgrounds were not provided on a long-term, consistent basis. Few DOL-funded sites implemented computer-assisted instruction as prescribed. While several sites assessed the educational achievement of enrollees, few sites translated those assessments into meaningful individualized education plans.
- All sites implemented the developmental component, although with a greater emphasis on recreational activities than suggested by the QOP model.
- No site implemented the community service component as prescribed. Sites scheduled only a small fraction of the prescribed number of community service activities.
- All sites implemented stipends successfully. All sites implemented accrual accounts, although DOL-funded sites did not provide regular account statements to enrollees. Several sites provided bonuses to enrollees who completed major program activities.

Most sites provided adequate food and, eventually, transportation services, but few sites provided adequate child care services or screening and referral for the physical and mental health needs of enrollees.

How Much Did Enrollees Participate?

Most enrollees attended relatively few program activities. Enrollees spent an average of 174 hours per year on QOP activities—23 percent of the annual goal of 750 hours—through the first four years of the demonstration. The average fell steadily from 247 hours in the first year to 89 hours in the fourth year, while the fraction of enrollees spending no time at all on QOP activities rose steadily from 1 percent to 36 percent.

Participation varied substantially from site to site. The average annual participation in the two Ford-funded sites was 294 hours—more than twice the average annual participation of 126 hours in the five DOL-funded sites.

How Much Did QOP Cost?

The total cost per enrollee over the full five-year demonstration period was \$18,000 to \$22,000 for DOL-funded sites, \$23,000 for the Yakima site, and \$49,000 for the Philadelphia site.

What Were QOP's Short-Term Impacts?

Primary Outcomes

- **QOP increased the likelihood of graduation.** QOP increased by a statistically significant seven percentage points the likelihood that enrollees graduated from high school with a diploma.
- **QOP increased the likelihood of engaging in postsecondary education or training.** The size and statistical significance of the impact, however, depends on how this outcome was measured and how the impact was estimated.

Secondary Outcomes

- **QOP did not improve grades or achievement test scores.**
- **QOP did not reduce risky behaviors.** QOP did not significantly reduce any risky behavior, including gang activity, crime, and teen parenting, and according to data from one of the evaluation surveys, QOP significantly increased the fraction of enrollees who had a drink and the fraction who used an illegal drug in the 30 days before the survey. However, some evidence suggests that there were differences between QOP enrollees and control-group youth in the accuracy with which they reported risky behaviors. Those differences might have contributed substantially to the estimated detrimental impacts on drinking and drug use. That QOP might not have increased drinking and drug use is also suggested by data from a second evaluation survey. According to those data, QOP had beneficial—but not significant—impacts on drinking and drug use.

Subgroup and Site Impacts

- **QOP helped some enrollees more than others.** For example, QOP was more beneficial for enrollees in the middle of the eligible grade distribution than for enrollees at the top or bottom of the distribution. For enrollees in the middle of the distribution, QOP significantly increased the likelihood of graduating from high school, the likelihood of graduating or earning a GED, and the likelihood of attending or being accepted by a college. QOP significantly reduced for these enrollees the likelihood of having a child.

- **QOP’s impacts varied from site to site.** And, only one of the seven sites—the Cleveland site—had significant beneficial impacts and no significant detrimental impacts. The Cleveland site significantly increased the likelihood of graduating from high school, significantly increased the likelihood of attending or being accepted by a college, and significantly decreased the likelihood of binge drinking.
- **Impacts for the whole demonstration were substantially—but not entirely—attributable to the impacts of the Philadelphia site alone or the Philadelphia and Yakima sites, the Ford-funded sites, together.** The Ford-funded sites significantly increased mathematics achievement and the likelihood of engaging in postsecondary education or training, significantly increased the combined likelihood of engaging in postsecondary education or training or having a good job, and significantly reduced the likelihood of having a child. However, these sites also significantly increased the likelihood of binge drinking, using an illegal drug, and committing a crime, although these detrimental impacts might not have been attributable to QOP for the reasons noted above. The DOL-funded sites significantly increased the likelihood of graduating from high school, one of QOP’s primary objectives. QOP had no other significant impacts in the DOL-funded sites.

These impacts are short-term impacts because we estimated them from data collected during the fourth and fifth years of the demonstration, that is, before the demonstration was over and when many youth were either still attending high school or had only recently graduated. Longer-term impacts, which may be a more appropriate basis for policy decisions, might be more or less beneficial than the short-term impacts presented in this report. To measure longer-term impacts, DOL is having us collect data in fall 2002 and fall 2004. The fall 2002 data collection is roughly seven years after the youth in the demonstration sample entered the ninth grade and two years after the end of the QOP demonstration.