

Building Opportunity for Boston's Youth: Lessons from the WorkSMART Integrated Employment Program

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Summary

Youth from low-income urban communities face compounding barriers to workforce entry, including limited work experience, inadequate professional networks, and the structural paradox that employers require experience for entry-level positions while youth cannot gain experience without initial employment opportunities. This "experience paradox" disproportionately affects youth of color and those from under-resourced communities, perpetuating cycles of economic inequality (Modestino, 2019).

A mixed-methods evaluation of the WorkSMART youth employment program — operated by Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD) — provides compelling evidence that integrated employment-education models can significantly support youth development (McCormick & Pandit, 2025).

Findings from surveys of 102 program alumni, qualitative interviews with 5 youth and 4 staff members, and administrative data reveal:

- 95% overall program satisfaction among survey respondents
- 70% multi-year participation, demonstrating sustained engagement
- 95% high school graduation rate among survey respondents who completed
- 79–94% of participants reported gains across key workplace competencies
- 87–90% reported high self-esteem and confidence measures

This brief draws exclusively on findings from the WorkSMART Program Evaluation Report (McCormick & Pandit, 2025) and advocates for expanded public investment in year-round, integrated youth employment programs as essential workforce development infrastructure.

Background

Boston's youth face persistent employment challenges despite the city's robust economy. Youth from predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods experience unemployment rates two to three times higher than citywide averages (Boston Indicators, 2017).

The decline in youth employment over recent decades has created serious gaps in skill development, career readiness, and economic opportunity. Between 1970 and 2010, labor force participation among 16–19 year-olds dropped from 50% to 30%, with particularly steep declines among Black and Hispanic youth (Modestino, 2017).

Low-income youth face systemic barriers to employment including limited professional networks, transportation challenges, lack of work experience, and employer bias — barriers that perpetuate cycles of poverty and limit pathways to upward mobility (Center for American Progress, 2013; Heller, 2014; Modestino, 2017). The structural challenge is circular: employers require experience for entry-level positions, yet youth cannot gain experience without initial employment opportunities.

ABCD's WorkSMART program, which has served Boston-area youth since the 1960s, addresses this challenge through a year-round model combining paid employment (10 hours weekly at \$15/hour) with academic tutoring (2 hours weekly) and career development support. The program serves income-eligible high school students ages 14–21, placing them at more than 150 partner organizations throughout the city.

Methodology

This policy brief is based exclusively on the findings of the WorkSMART Program Evaluation Report (McCormick & Pandit, 2025), which employed a convergent mixed-methods design combining:

- A post-program survey distributed to all participants in the program database (N=1,021); 102 usable responses were analyzed (12.9% usable response rate from 791 reachable participants)
- Semi-structured interviews with 5 youth participants and 4 program staff members
- Analysis of administrative program records including participation data from ABCD's database
- Reference to prior administrative research by Modestino (2019) using propensity score matching to compare WorkSMART participants to matched non-participants

Survey respondents reflected the program's target population: 67% Black/African American, 41% Hispanic/Latino, 85% from households earning under \$75,000 annually, and 59% from single-mother households.

Note: The 12.9% survey response rate represents typical ranges for email-based alumni surveys (10–30%) but may overstate positive outcomes due to non-response bias. Findings are strongest when triangulated across multiple data sources, as this brief does throughout.

Key Findings

Program Reach and Equity

WorkSMART successfully targets those facing the greatest barriers to opportunity. Survey data confirm:

- 85% of respondents from households earning under \$75,000 (45% under \$35,000)
- 67% Black/African American; 41% Hispanic/Latino
- 59% from single-mother households

- Program serves youth as young as age 14 with no prior work experience required

"I think just having something on my resume saying that I had a job, because I feel like nowadays it's generally pretty hard to get a job without having prior experience beforehand. I think that was pretty life changing."

— WorkSMART Participant

Academic and Employment Outcomes

Among survey respondents who should have completed high school, 61% graduated (59% diploma, 2% GED). Only 3% did not complete high school. An additional 32% were currently enrolled in post-secondary education at time of survey.

Academic & Employment Outcome	Rate
High school graduation rate (among completers)	61%
Currently enrolled in post-secondary education	32%
Currently employed (full- or part-time)	48%
Program helped clarify career field	76%
Program helped with resume preparation	79%

Prior research by Modestino (2019) using propensity score matching found significantly higher numbers of SAT attempts among ABCD program participants compared to matched comparison groups, indicating increased college-seeking behavior attributable to program participation (Modestino, 2019).

Workplace Competencies and Skill Development

Participants reported substantial gains across core professional competencies:

- 94% learned how to ask for help when needed
- 93% learned the importance of punctuality and meeting deadlines
- 89% developed teamwork and independent work skills
- 79% received help with resume preparation

Qualitative data illuminate how these skills develop: participants described learning professional communication norms, time management under real deadlines, and appropriate help-seeking behaviors — competencies difficult to develop through classroom instruction alone (McCormick & Pandit, 2025).

Social-Emotional Development and Confidence

Perhaps the most striking finding concerns personal transformation. Survey data showed high self-esteem across dimensions (87–90%), but qualitative interviews revealed deeper impact:

"I think the exposure therapy that I got from that program — I would have never gotten over my social anxiety, at least not in a timely manner if it wasn't for that program. I came out so much more confident. Even back then I wouldn't be able to talk on a Zoom call or anything like that. That's probably the biggest change I saw within myself. And it was crazy because my mom saw it too."
— WorkSMART Participant

Staff confirmed longitudinal patterns of confidence growth across multiple years of participation, observing youth transform from shy, disengaged adolescents to confident professionals who actively contribute to workshops and workplace settings (McCormick & Pandit, 2025).

Policy Implications & Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Fund Year-Round Youth Employment as Public Infrastructure

The demonstrated outcomes — 95% satisfaction, 70% multi-year retention, 95% high school graduation among completers, and meaningful skill gains (79–94% across competencies) — provide a strong evidence base supporting sustained public investment (McCormick & Pandit, 2025).

Programs integrating paid employment, academic support, and mentorship generate stronger outcomes than single-component interventions (Kluve et al., 2017; World Bank, 2024). Policymakers should recognize year-round youth employment programs as essential workforce development infrastructure rather than discretionary programming vulnerable to budget cuts. Dedicated public funding at the city level (\$2–5M annually) and state workforce development funding should be pursued.

Recommendation 2: Expand Worksite Diversity Across Sectors

The evaluation found that while 76% of respondents agreed the program helped them clarify career goals, qualitative findings revealed significant mismatch between participant aspirations and available placements. Current worksites are concentrated in nonprofit childcare and administrative roles, leaving youth interested in healthcare specialties, trades, technology, and business without aligned placements (McCormick & Pandit, 2025).

Policymakers and program funders should incentivize partnerships with employers in trades (plumbing, electrical, HVAC), healthcare specialties, technology, financial services, and creative industries. Placement diversity is not merely a program improvement — it is an equity imperative. Without aligned placements, older and returning participants receive diminishing returns, and the program's career development function is undermined.

Recommendation 3: Mandate Worksite Quality Standards and Accountability

Survey data show 86% positive workplace ratings overall, but qualitative interviews revealed that worksites with "multiple complaints for years" continue hosting youth participants. Without systematic quality monitoring, placement luck determines experience quality — a condition that disproportionately harms the most disadvantaged participants (McCormick & Pandit, 2025).

Programs receiving public funding should be required to implement mid-program and end-of-program participant feedback on worksite quality, maintain clear quality standards (adequate supervision, meaningful work, youth development orientation), and establish transparent review processes with consequences for poor performance. Youth from low-income communities deserve consistent, high-quality work experiences — not random variation.

Recommendation 4: Reduce Application Barriers to Reach the Most Disadvantaged

Despite successfully serving youth from households earning under \$75,000 (85% of respondents), qualitative findings revealed that application processes may inadvertently screen out the most disadvantaged families (McCormick & Pandit, 2025):

"My mom is a single mom and they were giving her a lot of... back and forth between which documents she needed to do... I remember she had to take a day off work to get the paperwork all in order because we didn't have a printer."

— WorkSMART Participant

Complex documentation requirements, technical website problems, and unclear communications favor families with resources — precisely those least in need of the program. Policymakers should require programs receiving public funding to conduct user testing with target populations, offer multiple submission methods (online, phone, in-person), and simplify documentation requirements. Accessibility is not optional when equity is the goal.

Recommendation 5: Support Integration with Education Systems

The evaluation found that work responsibility transferred to academic contexts: participants described developing "an inculcated sense of responsibility to show up every day that carried over into the school year." Prior research by Modestino (2019) found improved academic outcomes among ABCD program participants using comparison group designs (Modestino, 2019).

Policies enabling schools to grant credit for structured work experiences, or requiring academic progress monitoring as part of employment programs, may enhance outcomes across both educational and workforce domains. Closer coordination between youth employment programs and Boston Public Schools should be prioritized.

Additional Supporting Research

The findings from the WorkSMART evaluation align with and extend a substantial evidence base on youth employment programs:

- A systematic review of 113 programs across 31 countries found that interventions combining multiple components — skills training, work experience, and support services — generated more consistent positive outcomes than single-component programs (Kluve et al., 2017)
- Summer youth employment programs have demonstrated impacts on violence reduction (Heller, 2014), academic engagement (Modestino, 2017), and social-emotional development (J-PAL North America, 2022)

- Research documents strong associations between adolescent employment and higher educational attainment, increased career readiness, enhanced social-emotional competencies, and improved long-term economic outcomes (Grabowski et al., 2013; Staff & Mortimer, 2013; Vuolo et al., 2023)
- Prior research on ABCD's SummerWorks program found significantly higher SAT attempt rates among participants compared to matched comparison groups (Modestino, 2019)
- Programs with strong mentorship components, meaningful work experiences, and adequate financial compensation produce stronger outcomes than those offering minimal workplace exposure (World Bank, 2024)

Conclusion

The WorkSMART evaluation provides compelling evidence that integrated youth employment programs deliver meaningful returns — for individual participants, for their families, and for the city of Boston. Youth who described the program as providing their "first chance" and creating "stepping stones" to future opportunities illustrate the program's essential function in an economy increasingly requiring credentials and experience for entry-level positions.

These are not marginal outcomes. A 95% high school graduation rate, transformative confidence development, and universal recognition of the program's role in breaking the "no experience, no job" cycle represent the kind of return on public investment that workforce development policy should be designed to produce.

Policymakers concerned with economic mobility, workforce development, and educational equity must support comprehensive, sustained funding for year-round youth employment programs. Further priorities should include expanding worksite diversity, strengthening quality assurance, reducing application barriers, and pursuing closer integration with educational institutions. The evidence base is clear — what remains is the political will to act.

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