



A CASE STUDY of Youth Employment Partnership (YEP) Charter School

YEP Charter School

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Part 1: Background

Context of the Charter

In fall of 2002, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and Youth Employment Partnership, Inc. (YEP) entered into discussion to co-develop a charter school that would serve low-income youth who had dropped out of high school or who were at risk of dropping out. The intent was to marry an OUSD core high school academic program, which has a project-based, innovative learning experiences emphasis, with existing YEP case management, mentoring and job/career skills support to better engage disenfranchised youth in the community in their own education and to help them prepare for the future.

OUSD approved the charter petition to establish YEP Charter School on April 11, 2003. Subsequently, the charter was amended on October 29, 2003 due to changes resulting from the state receivership of OUSD.

Located at the YEP, Inc. building in east Oakland, YEP charter school is now in its fourth year of operations and enrolls between 20-22 students in its program throughout the year.

This Case Study of the Youth Employment Partnership (YEP) Charter School was conducted by Cambridge Education, LLC (CE) upon the request of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) Office of Charter Schools. The purpose of the study was to provide a contextualized report to assist in the evaluation of the school's program. Special consideration was given to the school's unique history, its small size, and the very nature of its educational program. As such, this review outlines, as a case study, the school's unique startup as an "internal" district charter and provides a fuller context of the students (of highly at-risk youth) whom the school serves.

This case study was built upon a full-day site visit to the school, including interviews with teaching staff, support staff, a parent and students; reviews of school documents; and detailed interviews which occurred over time with the YEP Executive Director and Director of Education. The names of the students in the profiles have been changed to protect their privacy, but are otherwise actual students who have attended the charter school.

Part 2: Vision and Life of Charter

The Development of an OUSD “Internal” Charter

The partnership between YEP, Inc. and OUSD to develop an “internal” charter sprang from a prior joint venture by the two organizations to develop a drop-out prevention program based on a Title II grant. The project was successful enough that the staff in the OUSD Alternative Education department and YEP began discussing a way to utilize the flexibility of a charter to create a “transitional” credit recovery program “enmeshed” within the OUSD Alternative Education department. The intent was to create another option within an envisioned “array” of district-sponsored options to serve traditionally underserved students by leveraging YEP resources and expertise related to work readiness training as a means to recruit and motivate students who have dropped out of the school system to return to and stay in school. To complement YEP’s expertise, OUSD would support a “transitional academic program” that would 1) re-acclimate drop outs to an academic environment, 2) provide opportunities to reclaim high school credits and 3) prepare students with “readiness to learn” skills to successfully transition back into a traditional high school program to earn their diploma.

Multiple discussions and planning sessions held between the YEP program directors and OUSD staff from Alternative Education and the Charter Schools Office, as well as the former OUSD superintendent, resulted in a charter petition that was jointly crafted between the two organizations during February-April, 2003. Although YEP was created to be a “transitional” drop out recovery program, the language in the charter was modified during the negotiations to ensure that the school could, if necessary, become a stand-alone, comprehensive high school program. YEP administrators said that the decision to make YEP a stand-alone, year-long high school program would only have been at the discretion and with the assistance of OUSD’s Alternative Education office. “We said to everyone, ‘we don’t do proms,’ ” maintains the YEP Director. “We always insisted that there would be no long-term enrollment of students at the school. The model was to pull them [the students] back into the system and give them a place to build up their academic and job skills while we develop a transition plan for them to go back into the regular system.”

In order to meet timelines to apply for the federal Charter Schools Grant Program, YEP’s charter was approved in April 2003 with the intent to use the 2003-2004 school year as a planning year with no students enrolled. Despite the fact that OUSD was in flux with the incoming state take over in 2003, key OUSD staff continued to work with YEP during the 2003-2004 planning year on the school’s curriculum and program development. In fact, OUSD staff worked very closely with YEP in the formation of three “vocational” (career) pathways in the areas of computer/technology, construction and life services that would act as a “pilot.” Relevant academic projects and job skills training were to be built into each of these pathways. As the school moved towards opening, the teachers hired for the school began to develop a curriculum that would meet those needs.

YEP Charter School Year One and Two

YEP charter school began its first year of operations at the same time OUSD began its first school year under state receivership. The school opened in the fall of 2004 with approximately 25 students and maintained an enrollment of between 25-30 students throughout the year.

The school employed two full-time teachers who covered the subjects of English/language arts, social science, math and science between the two of them. Students had a full school-day in which they received instruction in all four core academic areas. According to YEP directors, those teachers, with good communication and support from OUSD staff, developed a curriculum that closely aligned with the project-based, experiential learning methods outlined in the YEP charter document. The wooden floor of the YEP conference room, for example, is the result of a project-based learning (PBL) math

activity during that first year. Additionally, YEP provided 30 hours of job skills training for its students and placed students who were had reached the age of 18 in a specific job.

The school was on a “trimester” system, and students were to “transition out” to their next placement (usually a comprehensive high school, another alternative education program, or a YEP adult program (if the student were 18 years or older) at the end of each trimester. OUSD staff worked initially with YEP on each student’s Transition Plan Assessment (TPA) to ensure the right placement within the district.

As the first school year progressed, however, YEP administrators found that students were choosing to stay at the school for more than one trimester. Once enrolled, students and parents found the school small, safe and more supportive than the students’ previous educational environment. Some students were feeling so successful that they did not want to leave. In fact, many were resisting their new placements and insisting on continuing their enrollment at YEP. As neither the school curriculum nor the administrative structure (especially in the area of student discipline) was set up to be a year-long program, this posed a unique challenge to the YEP corporation. At the same time, the OUSD original partnership with YEP outlined in the charter began to change. Under a myriad of restructuring and changes in staffing, OUSD gradually became less and less involved in operations of the school. YEP administrators were left to address start-up issues on their own.

According to YEP directors, the second year of the charter school’s operations brought better clarity of what the program was – a *transitional*, drop-out recovery program. Stricter policies were developed and clearer procedures were put into place to ensure that students enrolled in the program understood the purpose of YEP and the transitional plan assessments (TPA). Students and parents were introduced to the TPA upon enrollment and a plan was developed with input from the parents and students on the student’s ultimate placement after YEP. By the second year, however, OUSD was no longer involved in the Transitional Plan Assessments, so YEP administrators began to find placements for its students themselves. Meanwhile, the two teachers who worked for the school the first year returned for the second year and continued to work on curriculum development, integrating project-based learning within specific “vocational” strands. At this point, the close partnership with OUSD originally envisioned began fade, and YEP leadership was gradually left on its own to construct the academic program outlined in the charter. Meanwhile, the wide variation in the skill levels of the students continued to be a great challenge for the YEP teachers and for curriculum design. Curricular support and professional development through the district ceased, and oversight from the district came in the way of sporadic on-site visits from the state administrator, whose focus at the time was to ensure that the school was indeed serving dropouts and not transfers from the local high schools.

YEP Charter School Year Three

The third year of operations for YEP Charter School was particularly challenging. The two teachers who had started with the school left after Year 2 for various reasons, and three new teachers were hired to replace them; one in Language arts/social science, one in math and one in science. The science teacher was also assigned as the “principal” of the school. According to YEP administrators, the new teachers had challenges in working with the YEP student population during that year, and several inappropriate remarks and conduct led to the dismissal of the principal/science teacher. The dismissal resulted in a law suit by the employee and propelled the YEP organization into a time-consuming and costly process. Although YEP eventually won the suit, the situation put a great strain on YEP administrative staff. Additionally, the Language arts/social science teacher also resigned from the school mid-year for personal reasons, resulting in a new teacher coming in mid-year.

Despite challenges with personnel in it third year, YEP staff reported that students in the school were kept “insulated” from the adult personnel issues. The school continued to operate with about 20 students per enrollment cycle, and teacher continued to develop curriculum and work with students. Enrollment remained steady with some students transitioning after one trimester and others staying through two or three, depending on their progress. According to the YEP directors, the need for a program such as YEP continued to be validated by types of students who made their way into the

program, as illustrated by the student profiles in the next section. What then kept many of the students in the school was the rapport with the teachers, the trusting relationships that were built with adults, and the YEP leadership's commitment to recruit and "hold on" to its students until they are ready to transition.

Despite some of the major challenges in the 2006-2007 school year, YEP chose to continue the program solely because of its passion to serve its targeted student population. YEP directors report that their greatest challenges lie, not with the retention of teachers, but in trying to find ways to best assist and support the students to "stay in the system." The students' intense emotional, social and academic needs drive the school's sole purpose to date.

Student Profiles

The following provides an illustration of the types of students who are served by YEP.

Samantha Smith

Samantha entered YEP Charter September 2005 with approximately 80 high school credits and was not on track for graduation. YEP implemented a comprehensive school/work-training plan to support her graduation by 2007, which included classes at Laney community college. In addition, Samantha displayed extreme behavioral patterns that required anger management support and intensive case management. With continued support and monitoring, Samantha successfully completed her high school requirements by 2007. She also completed the construction training program and job readiness training workshops. Today Samantha works part time at Safeway while pursuing course work in fire fighting at Laney community college. Samantha remains in contact with YEP staff.

Lucretia Lopez

Lucretia came to YEP Charter September 2006 and had not been attending high school for six months. Lucretia was receptive to YEP school/work and quickly began working after-school at a daycare center. One of Lucretia's main problems was not being able to focus on her classroom work for extended periods of time, which resulted in Lucretia roaming the halls. This behavior was addressed by internal case management and only allowing Lucretia to attend work when she successfully completed her daily schools tasks. Over a period of time Lucretia showed great improvement and eventually transitioned to a local comprehensive high school. Today Lucretia is on track for graduation at that high school and attends YEP's after-school job placement services.

Damon Jones

Damon entered YEP Charter September 2007 after attending UPREP, an Oakland charter high school which closed their doors after spring '07. Damon began the year with a solemn demeanor and was very distant with teachers and staff. The closure of his school had a definite impact on Damon's overall behavior toward school. Damon demonstrated grade level (11th) appropriate English, Math skills, but was unwilling to do the work. As his case manager and teachers continued to support Damon, he received customer service training which lead to placement at the Training Grounds Café, a YEP café located at the Oakland Airport. Damon was so enthusiastic about his new job; it became the driving force behind his improved attitude and commitment to school work. Damon has now transitioned to a comprehensive high school, Dewey and YEP is in the process of hiring him as an assistant manager at the café.

Part 3: Current Year Assessment

YEP Charter School currently enrolls between 18-22 students (ranging in ages between 14 -18) throughout the school year. The school is operating as a high school “credit recovery” transitional program as an additional program offering among the other eleven (11) YEP, Inc. youth development programs.

The school offers unique educational features which include:

- 1) Targeted recruitment
- 2) 30 hours of job readiness training (JRT)
- 3) 20 credits of English/Language Arts
- 4) Job placement
- 5) One-on-one case management/support
- 6) Mentoring

Students are enrolled in the program for eight-week terms in which they have an opportunity to earn up to 20 academic credits towards a high school diploma and 30 hours of job skills training. Upon enrollment, students are interviewed by a YEP mental health provider who assesses the students’ readiness to enter the program academically, socially and emotionally. Students of greatest need are referred to social service partners such as Youth Uprising and the East Bay Asian Youth Center.

The YEP staff and directors are dedicated to the mission of the charter to serve the most at-risk youth in the community and, therefore, have made concerted efforts to 1) recruit students from other youth centers, foster care referrals, probation officers and juvenile hall, and 2) keep students in the program, despite consistent and regular behavior issues, repeated truancy, and academic inertia. To support student needs, YEP places considerable resources in counseling, job placement, mentoring and in creating individualized plans and goals for each student. Additionally, the school has employed individuals with backgrounds and experiences similar to those students, which has helped in establishing rapport and trust between the students and adults in the charter school. The staff, consisting of teachers, counselors, the junior counselor and the school director, hold weekly meetings to discuss students and develop intervention and/or support efforts based on immediate student needs.

Students understand that the YEP Charter School is one of the “last” options for them to recover high school credits while learning critical job skills. A good proportion of YEP students are almost 18 years of age with very few credits and little hope of earning a high school diploma. These students typically are in a “holding pattern” at the school until they turn 18 when they can then take and hopefully earn a GED. The YEP director expressed that they “hold on” to these students in the charter school until they can transition to an “adult” YEP, Inc. program because letting them go at this point would typically mean that the youth would be lost to the program entirely.

In fact, YEP defines its success as “recruiting and keeping students close the program in order to get them to the ‘next step’.” The “next step” typically means a successful young adult job placement, a GED, and/or transition back into a traditional school to earn a high school diploma. To that end, the focus of YEP has been more in the area of recruitment and retention of students in the program and less on academic readiness and rigor.

While the current English/language arts teachers are attempting to balance the varying, academic, social and emotional needs of the students in the school, the academic curriculum of YEP charter school is not strong. While some solid rapport has been made with some of the students, the school is still establishing its academic vision and instructional approach and has struggled to maintain the

right teaching staff for its student population. Over the past four years, YEP has had 8 different teachers, averaging at just about a one-year tenure at the school. Additionally, the school's current academic offerings are limited to only English/language arts instruction.

It is, however, laudable that YEP, Inc. has endeavored to keep some academic curricular program in place for credit recovery, especially as this was the component that OUSD had originally intended to provide in the charter.

Summary Observations:

- The school provides strong, individualized support for the academic, social, emotional and career/job needs of all of its students.
- The school leverages well the job readiness training (JRT) curriculum and various employment and social services partnerships already established by Youth Employment Partnerships, Inc. to support its charter school students.
- The school has employed individuals with backgrounds and experiences similar to those students, which has helped in establishing rapport and trust between the students and adults in the charter school.
- The school is still establishing its academic vision and instructional approach.
- The school is currently limited in its academic offerings due to difficulties in finding the right teachers for the program
- The school has yet to gather comprehensive data to inform and support its successes and areas for improvement.

Part 4: Summary

Youth Employment Partnership, Inc. is still enthusiastic that it can play a role in what the organization believes to be the root cause of unemployment – high school drop outs, and the staff of the charter are just as committed to serving the school's unique student population. But the intent of YEP Inc., according to the directors, was to be a *support* player in the development of a model program and partnership between non-profit and school district to best serve disenfranchised youth.

As such, the YEP Charter School program today is a drastic departure from the OUSD/non-profit partnership envisioned in the charter. The academic program of the school, as a result, is not fully meeting its purpose. YEP would very much like to re-engage OUSD equal partner in this venture of creating and maintaining a viable, district-sponsored drop-out prevention and reclamation program to better serve the needs of OUSD students.