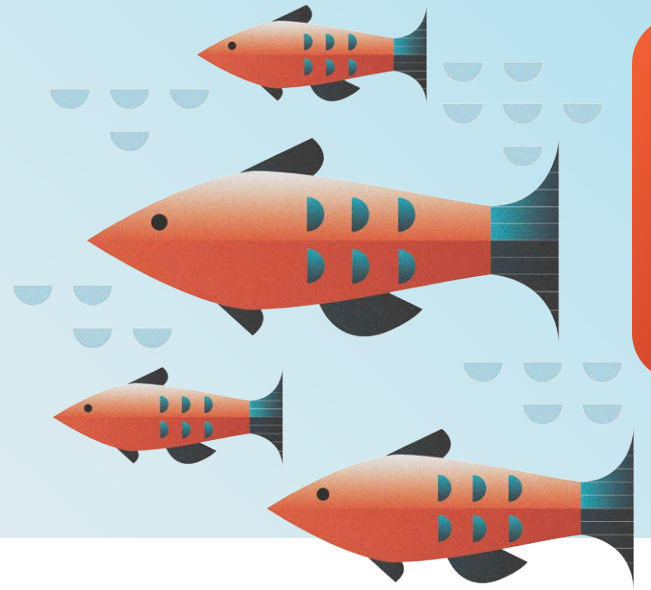


Supporting Youth through Foundry's Work and Education Program



HIGHLIGHTS

Employment and education are key social determinants of health that are integral to a holistic approach to youth health and wellness.

A person-centred, individualized, time-unlimited approach to inclusive employment, education and training provides more **equitable access so each young person can achieve their full potential.**

The Foundry Work and Education (FWE) program is an effective, strengths-based model that supports youth before and after achieving a work or education outcome to ensure sustained gains. **In comparison to traditional employment programs, the rate of youth in FWE who are completing training, returning to school or gaining employment is more than double.**

BACKGROUND

Employment and Education are a Part of Youth Health and Wellness

Employment is often framed as a practical, economic need. In reality, as a key determinant of health, it is much more: it offers a structure for daily routines and supports self-confidence, self-esteem and feeling productive and valued.¹ It creates opportunity to connect with others and broaden one's community, and it supports one's sense of belonging, identity and independence.² Indeed, one of the strongest indicators of mental health or substance use 'recovery' is a person's ability to obtain and maintain meaningful employment or participate in [higher] education.^{3,4} The role of quality employment in supporting overall well-being is particularly significant for youth who are at a crucial life stage for developing broader social, intellectual and life skills and networks to support their individual journeys into adulthood.

"I think having something to wake up in the morning and go where people need and wait for you is a wonderful experience."

Youth

Training and education are also crucial pathways for well-being. Education shapes access to opportunity, employment and income — thereby working to reduce broader socioeconomic inequality. As a key social determinant of health, education can also increase capacity for decision making and facilitates access to the social and personal resources that support health and well-being.

Yet the barriers to employment for many young people are multiple. They include lack of work experience, mental health symptoms and stigma, systemic racism and discrimination, lack of transportation and a siloed service system approach, among others.⁵ Mental health symptoms, such as anxiety and low motivation, impact one's ability to obtain and maintain employment.⁶ Previous negative experiences with employers can also deter youth from seeking new opportunities — yet stopping their involvement with employment can, in turn, contribute to a worsening of their mental health symptoms.⁵ For equity-denied youth,^a such as Indigenous, racialized and gender and sexually diverse youth, these

a The term "equity-denied" is used to describe individuals and communities who face barriers that hinder them from having access to resources and opportunities due to systemic discrimination and oppression. For more details on this term, please see this resource: [Guide on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Terminology. Government of Canada; 2023.](#)

PURPOSE

This policy brief highlights key Foundry learnings on the challenges and opportunities in developing an inclusive, evidence-based employment program within an integrated youth services (IYS) setting.

ABOUT US

Foundry is a provincial IYS initiative in British Columbia that offers a range of low-barrier and youth-friendly services for youth ages 12-24 in the areas of mental health, substance use support, peer support, physical and sexual health, and social services, including inclusive employment.

barriers may be further compounded by discrimination, the historic and intergenerational impacts of racism and ongoing systemic harms. Similarly, leaving school can have negative impacts beyond non-completion and future employment, as youth may not undergo the same transitions as their peers, experiencing social dislocation and loss of friendships and social networks.⁷

Ensuring that youth can access these opportunities to build their future is crucial. Studies show that youth ‘not in employment, education or training’ (NEET) and/or that do not have a high school diploma have a much greater risk of being permanently un- or underemployed, experiencing long-lasting repercussions around economic hardship such as lifetime earnings and also poorer health and reduced quality of life.⁸ Over 1 in 10 youth ages 15-29 in British Columbia are NEET — more than twice the overall

provincial unemployment rate.⁹ Youth with a mental health-related disability, a learning disability or both are at an even greater risk of being NEET.¹⁰

On a systems level, there have been efforts to increase funding and capacity for youth employment programs. However, programs are often funded from several different areas and levels of government, creating inequitable, misaligned and fragmented services with differing focuses, rigid eligibility criteria, variable levels of support (often time-restricted) as well as waitlists. In addition, programs are often funded in a cyclical manner, creating a lack of continuity within services for clients, staff and organizations. These structural elements compound the daily challenges and barriers to employment for young people in need of employment and health supports.

Individual Placement and Support (IPS) with and for Young People

Individual placement and support (IPS) programs have emerged as a proven, evidence-based and strengths-focused model for promoting low-barrier and inclusive employment and educational supports. In British Columbia, the Foundry Work and Education (FWE) program fills a key gap by providing a provincial, youth-specific, IPS program to support young people. From early beginnings as a 10-person pilot program in 2015,^b the program has grown to include 13 centres and provincial virtual services by 2024. It is now expanding to a further 5 centres (for a total of 18), with hopes to continue expanding into future Foundry centres as they open. Program uptake has been significant, with 779 youth participating in FWE and more than 4,500 in-person and virtual program visits in

the 2023/2024 fiscal year.^c Since 2021, 80% of youth were not in employment and 73% were not in education upon entry to the program.^d

The FWE program, in line with Foundry’s youth-centred integrated youth services (IYS) approach, follows the eight core IPS principles to address many traditional barriers to youth employment. This includes emphasizing a person-centred approach wherein a youth’s individual qualifications and preferences are a driver in identifying opportunities and goals. It also includes using an integrated team-based approach to address mental health and health barriers. FWE employment specialists also work with employers in their communities to build relationships, reduce employer reluctance and address community

b The FWE program was originally developed in partnership with ACCESS Open Minds and Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario as part of the LIFT pan-Canadian partnership.

c 1,367 youth have participated in the FWE program since 2021.

d This policy brief utilizes administrative data collected from youth who accessed FWE between April 2021 and March 2024. Demographic data is based on voluntary self-reporting by youth. Youth quotes were obtained from a FWE Youth Experience Evaluation published in July 2023 as well as embedded research processes.

THE EIGHT IPS PRINCIPLES⁹

1. Zero exclusion criteria
2. Focus on competitive employment
3. Attention to participants' preferences
4. IPS programs are integrated with mental health treatment teams
5. Personalized one-on-one benefits counselling
6. Rapid job search
7. Systematic job development
8. Time unlimited and individualized support

stigma. Finally, program supports are not time limited, providing individuals with the agency to exit the program on their own terms.

IPS is an established approach that has been shown to be effective for a range of participants, such as those with mental health diagnoses and individuals experiencing homelessness,¹¹ as well as in rural and remote settings.¹² Numerous studies show that clients in IPS services experience higher rates of success finding employment compared to traditional employment programs, which are typically delivered in a non-integrated setting with a specific, time-limited duration.^{13,14} IPS for young people specifically has shown compelling outcomes. A recent (2023)

systematic review found IPS to be effective in helping youth with mental health challenges both gain and retain employment, with those in IPS 70% more likely to gain competitive employment compared to traditional employment programs.¹⁵ Among youth who have completed FWE, approximately 70% have achieved an outcome such as starting work or returning to school, more than double compared to traditional employment programs.¹⁵ This is aligned with and exceeds outcomes currently reported in other IPS programs, with the most recent meta-analysis reporting a pooled competitive employment rate of 58% among youth participating in IPS.¹⁵

Foundry Work and Education: Learnings and Analysis

Approaching Each Young Person as a Unique Individual

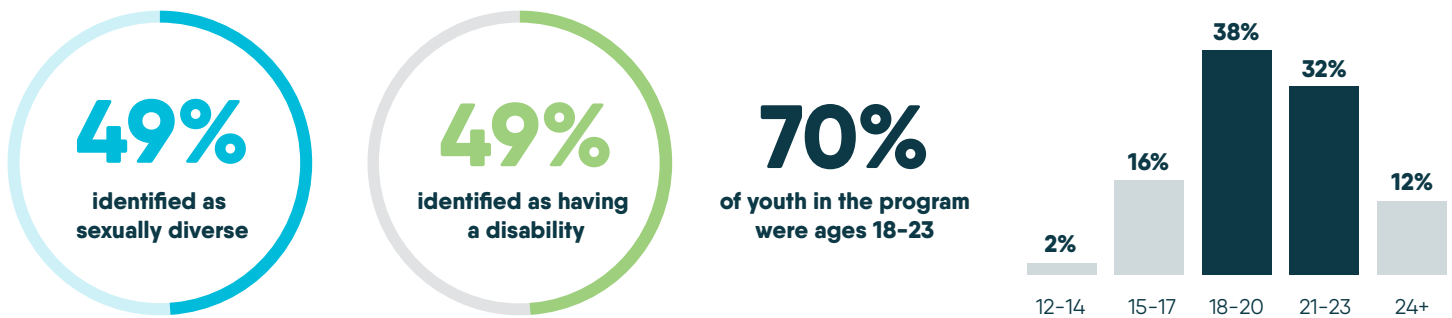
A fundamental pillar of FWE is ensuring an individualized approach that recognizes the unique identities, circumstances and interests of each young person. Of the youth in the program, 49% identified as sexually diverse and 49% identified as having a disability. The program allows those youth to access supports that consider and embrace their unique context. FWE staff validate youth interests and preferences, supporting youth-driven goal identification and helping build self-confidence in the process. Young people are supported 1:1 with their education and employment goals and parallel practical supports (e.g., resume building, interview practice, course identification and enrollment support, financial assistance for application fees, uniforms), wellness and life skills (e.g., budgeting, time management, navigating public transit) as well as with the social, emotional and clinical supports to manage mental health or other symptoms.

A person-centred approach is particularly valuable when working with a diverse range of young people who have faced complex

and persistent barriers to education or employment. At intake, over 50% of youth reported three or more barriers, and nearly 30% reported five or more barriers to education and employment, with the most common barriers reported as mental health-related challenges and poor work or education history. Lack of transportation and poor social relationships are also frequently noted, highlighting how a young person's individual or community context can exacerbate challenges.

Many youth in the FWE program are at a critical time of development — 70% are ages 18–23, also known as “transition age” youth (See Figure A). Foundry strives to ensure its IPS approach is tailored to youth navigating this stage of life. When they enter the program, this could mean reducing the number of forms and their length or completing forms collaboratively over multiple sessions rather than requiring completion prior to accessing the program. It also includes elements such as conducting outreach over social media or meeting participants in places they are

FIGURE A: CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUTH ACCESSING FOUNDRY'S WORK AND EDUCATION PROGRAM^c



“The most positive thing in my opinion, other than the obvious way that having someone help me with planning schooling, were the various group training programs (food safe, cooking, first-aid, etc.) that they run when possible. They really helped me get back into the whole ‘talking with other people’ thing.”

Youth

“It has showed me that I am worthy, and I know what I want in life.”

Youth

most comfortable — at school, home, a Foundry centre or a coffee shop. For young people seeking employment, this may mean focusing on employment as self-development and learning around what environments are a good fit and why, without fearing their supports may change because of their age. In all cases, it means an overarching priority on the relationship with the young person.

As part of the individualized approach, employment specialists also work with employers proactively, facilitating connections

and providing information and education around options to better accommodate individual youth and promote mutual success. Simple adjustments such as youth-friendly language, flexible scheduling or a more tailored onboarding can create safer employment environments and reduce unconscious stigma at the community level. In smaller, rural communities where individuals might already be known to each other in some way, this can be particularly helpful in creating more opportunities.

Post-Placement Support: Sustaining Ongoing Success

In contrast to many traditional work and study programs, FWE does not automatically discharge youth once they obtain an employment or educational outcome — it continues to provide services as needed, called “post-placement support.” For many young people, transitioning to a new work environment itself can be a source of anxiety. Points of apprehension can include the youth’s ability to maintain work, manage new co-worker relationships and cope with new stressors that may arise. Recognizing that young workers under 25 are at higher risk for workplace injury due to elements such as lack of orientation, hesitancy to ask questions and workplace inexperience,¹⁶ allowing for post-placement support is even more important. The risk of injury is three

times higher for workers in the first month of their job.¹⁶ Staff can also coach youth in other skills development such as navigating work accommodations, advocacy skills or time management and prioritization to balance newfound demands of work or return to school.

Close to 80% of youth who responded to a 2023 experience survey^e reported that they continued to visit staff even after achieving an employment or study outcome. On average, youth had 3 post-placement visits after completing the program. Youth reported wanting to further develop their skills related to work and education outcomes, to receive additional support to maintain their job or stay in school and to continue the meaningful

^e This data was collected through a FWE Youth Experience Evaluation published in July 2023. Among 40 youth who achieved their employment/education goal, 31 continued to see their service provider post-placement.

“I also got a lot of confidence, a lot more self-efficacy, and a lot more faith in my own capabilities and belief in myself. [...] Having a job and going to school really makes me feel like I will have a future and a good one”

Youth

“Everyone really getting together and giving updates on what’s going on for them and figuring out how to work together and support people toward what they want to do.”

Foundry Service Provider

“They are great at communicating between each other and I feel like I have a whole circle of people who want to see me do my best.”

Youth

“The fact that I now have a safety net I can trust that will help me learn skills that bring me confidence in my ability to adult.”

Youth

relationship they have with their service provider. Further planning also often arises at this juncture, as with a steady income and support for their health and wellness, young people are often then interested in looking at new goals related to further education or other areas of their life. In other cases, youth feel ready to move forward and choose to exit the program after their placement without additional visits.

The value of having these extra supports and a time-unlimited approach is particularly important recognizing the additional systemic barriers that participating youth often have. Ensuring longer-term supports are available without delay or stigma is important to address both emergent opportunities and challenges that arise throughout the employment and educational journeys of participants.

The Value of Employment Supports within an Integrated Care Team

While the key innovation of the IPS model was combining employment services with mental health services, FWE has expanded on this concept to include the broader continuum of integrated services. In this manner, youth have access to a range of service providers and clinical professionals, such as social workers, physicians or nurse practitioners, counsellors and peer support workers, to help determine the best approach and support plan for them. This allows the program to support the interface between clinical and nonclinical specialties, as well as behavioural and primary care competencies. The flexibility, variety and range of training and expertise available to bridge between areas of specialty is much wider than in other IPS programs and certainly beyond traditional employment programs.

Service integration is supported through multiple facets. At the outset, team members often work together to determine the best method to engage the interested youth, whether it be through introductory meetings at a centre or via an outreach approach. Once a young person is connected to service, integration is facilitated through shared medical records for common case notes, weekly case meetings as well as dialogue between centres in different areas to share practice learnings and resources.

Of the youth who participated in FWE between April 2021 and March 2024, **90% accessed at least one other Foundry service**. Over half of internal (within Foundry) referrals to FWE come from Foundry’s mental health services, underscoring the link between mental health and employment/education support. Participants have also reported a number of other improvements in self-rated health and mental health.^f

There is also some initial anecdotal and program information suggesting that employment may be a unique access point to integrated health and wellness services. A higher proportion of young people identifying as boys/men access FWE than other Foundry services.^g Further investigation is needed to understand if young men feel more comfortable connecting with an employment-based service than a mental health and wellness one and if FWE acts as an entry point for young men into other services.

^f Further analysis on these outcomes is underway. More detailed information on the impacts of the Foundry Work and Education program on participants’ physical and mental health will be shared in further publications.

^g From April 2021 to March 2024, 40% of youth in FWE who completed the demographic survey identified as “male.” Foundry is working to ensure data categories are evidence-based and aligned with the gender categories outlined by Statistics Canada. For more information, please see this resource: [Age, Sex at Birth, and Gender Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2021. Statistics Canada; 2022.](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge, with much gratitude, that our work takes place on land steeped in rich Indigenous history and home to many First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples today. We recognize that Foundry centres are situated on the traditional and ancestral territories of many First Nations communities, and we are humbled and thankful to be able to carry our work forward with Indigenous Peoples who have been stewards of this land since time immemorial.

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Recommendations

The benefits of the Foundry Work and Education program arise not only from leveraging the IPS approach but from offering services in an IYS setting that supports social and health outcomes along the continuum of need. As Foundry implements FWE across our network, we continue to learn how to better support youth in their wellness journey. The following recommendations act as a starting point for youth-serving systems and organizations interested in employment.

1. Continue to expand and coordinate access to youth-specific IPS programs within integrated settings.

Through the development and integration of Foundry Work and Education into Foundry's IYS model, we have increasingly understood the value of education and employment as strong determinants in the overall health and wellness of young people. FWE supports youth in skill-building to achieve their education and employment goals, while also supporting their mental health and wellness. These are benefits that can last a lifetime. Support to sustain and expand access to this and similar health and wellness-based employment services for young people is critical.

Part of the expansion of access is ensuring stronger integration with other provincial employment services, such as WorkBC, that are not able to provide youth-specific specialized supports and/or health services access. In some cases, they may also be able to support access to a broader array of employment or education resources if needed. Facilitating more coordinated and collaborative service pathways between all available employment programs will ensure more young people across the province are supported to thrive.

2. Expand knowledge on the needs and experiences of inclusive employment for diverse young people.

IPS is an established, well-researched inclusive employment intervention. To date, there has been minimal IPS literature specifically highlighting the detailed experiences and outcomes in particular groups of equity-

denied youth, such as racialized or Indigenous youth. While our experience shows that IPS does work for these young people, more information is needed to ensure appropriate support strategies are in place for young people facing challenges such as discrimination or race-based stress in the context of employment. There is also further opportunity to understand how employment services within an integrated care setting can act as an entry point for those less likely to access health and wellness services, such as young men.

3. Explore optimizing ways to represent long-term success that align youth, service provider and funder goals and needs.

The assessment of employment programs typically focuses on outcomes related to job placement and retention. While critical, our learning with young people and service providers is that these outcomes do not best reflect the significant work and achievements completed along the way. These other outcomes may be just as significant to participants, ranging from a well-completed interview to stronger social connections or building personal life skills. Particularly in the context of employment for young people, certain elements benefit them across their life span and contribute to job retention, such as skill development, the ability to explore different career paths and understanding their strengths and preferences, alongside broader health and wellness successes. These considerations continue to support dialogue on how to best measure and share out program goals and performance.

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info@foundrybc.ca | foundrybc.ca

For questions about this document, please contact policy@foundrybc.ca