

# REACH Ashland Youth Center

## 2022-2023 Evaluation

This learning brief presents findings from four focus groups conducted with REACH members in May 2023.

### Youth Focus Groups focused on Academics + Learning



REACH supports youth in a variety of ways with the aim of helping them succeed both socially and academically, resulting in youth graduating from high school with a range of options and high levels of self-determination. In May 2023, staff from Raimi + Associates (the REACH evaluation team) conducted four focus groups with REACH members who have participated in a range of recreation, education, art, career, and health programming to explore youth perspectives related to their academic success. The focus groups were organized by age (7th/8th graders, 9th/10 graders, 11th/12th graders, and youth no longer in traditional high school), and posed a range of questions related to academic success and future interests post high school. Focus group data were analyzed using a content analysis approach.<sup>1</sup> Highlighted findings in this learning brief present cross cutting findings as well as recommendations for future programming.

Intended Results of REACH's Work	Guiding Questions for Youth Focus Groups
✓ All youth are <b>healthy</b> physically, mentally, and emotionally.	A. What does being successful in high school mean to you? What does being successful in life look like to you?
✓ Youth are supported by <b>safe and nurturing communities</b> .	B. How has REACH supported you with your schoolwork, educational interests, and job opportunities?
✓ Youth are actively involved in making <b>decisions in their community</b> .	C. Who has talked with you about ideas or options for after high school? What could you see yourself doing?
✓ Youth <b>succeed</b> academically and socially.	D. What things could you do now to be ready for those plans or goals for after high school?
✓ Youth are prepared for and engaged in jobs leading towards a <b>career</b> .	E. What would you be interested in learning more about to prepare for after high school? College? Scholarships? Job fairs?
✓ Youth are supported by <b>safe and nurturing families</b> .	F. What goals could you set now that would help you prepare to graduate?
✓ Systems are <b>integrated</b> , and care is coordinated and <b>equitable</b> .	G. What do you think would be helpful for REACH to think about related to supporting young people to be ready to graduate from high school with options and ready for life-long learning?

<sup>1</sup> Content analysis is a data analysis technique where qualitative data is reviewed, coded, and interpreted based on the most frequently occurring themes that emerge from a set of data.

# KEY FINDINGS

## YOUTH IDENTIFIED A RANGE OF WAYS REACH HAS SUPPORTED THEIR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT + POST-HIGH SCHOOL PURSUITS

The REACH Ashland Youth Center provides youth with a safe space and supportive environment to explore their interests and support them in their academic and social growth. REACH youth identified many benefits from participating in REACH Ashland Youth Center's programs, and shared specific examples of REACH's positive impact on both their individual lives and their community as a whole. The following findings highlight benefits that REACH youth identified as most impactful on their education, job readiness, and future options after high school.

### Creating a Safe Space

Youth reported feeling safe at REACH and noted that REACH staff always make them feel welcome, contributing to a positive environment at REACH. This made the youth feel comfortable being able to explore being themselves.

*“REACH [has] really impacted this community, because I feel like without REACH, there would have been more gang members and the kids would not have the freedom... to actually be kids. For example... before I could become a REACH member, I grew up too fast... I feel like when REACH was built, and when I started coming here, it gave me a sense of freedom where I could just be a kid. And honestly, REACH is like family to me. And so, I feel like every time I come here, I could be weird and I could just be myself... I feel like they accept me for who I am. They accept everyone. I feel like this is what the community needs. And I feel like there should be more places like this.”*

— 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Member

### Homework + Academics Time (HAT)

In fall of 2022, REACH staff began implementing a Homework and Academics Time (HAT) for approximately 20 minutes at the beginning of all programming. By structuring HAT as the beginning of all regular workshops/program sessions, REACH provided a dedicated space and time for youth to do their homework with support from REACH staff and their peers. Youth in all focus groups noted that this time ensured that youth had time and space without the distractions often encountered at home to check in about and complete assignments.

### Academic Success, Success + Options After High School

Most of the youth in the focus groups defined success in high school through academic measures (e.g., getting A's, maintaining a high GPA, taking advanced placement courses), and many youth also noted the importance of academic success in order to become competitive college applicants. Many youth articulated hopes of one day being able to secure a well-paying job and having financial security (for both themselves and their families) and recognized that college is often necessary for well-paying jobs.

Some of the youth in the focus groups defined success in high school in relationship to meeting needs their family has right now. For these youth — especially youth in immigrant families — being able to maintain a job and financially support their families *now* is as important as their academic performance. While some of these youth described success in high school as successfully balancing both their grades and their part-time jobs, a small number of the youth noted that their families' current financial hardships were more of a pressing concern than their grades.

*“Being successful... is just being able to survive... being able to afford things, to have a roof over your head.”*

— Transitional Age Youth Enrolled in the Opportunity Academy at REACH

*“The thing that is [success] for me is [helping] my family get a little house in my country.”*

*— 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Member*

## **Providing Guidance + Support**

Some of the youth described their struggles with mental health and depression, and how these challenges have impacted their education. Similarly, youth reported a range of challenges at home, and how those situations made it difficult to focus on school and on their aspirations for college.

The youth noted and appreciated the guidance and support they received from REACH staff, which ranged from REACH staff mediating issues between them and teachers or school, assisting youth with completing missing assignments, or allowing them to explore their creative passions and interests in music and media.

*“This place kind of helped me turn my life back [around]. I was at home doing nothing and had no community [because] I didn’t really have any friends like that. [REACH] helped me open up my perspective with art, and it helped me build skills...”*

*— 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Member*

Youth greatly appreciated the mentorship from REACH staff and were receptive to advice from REACH staff they had built rapport or a relationship with.

*“[A specific REACH staff person who was previously a REACH member] is somebody I trust my education with a lot... He says community college — [so now I think] let’s do it.”*

*— 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Member*

REACH has provided some youth with tailored support to help young people graduate from high school and/or get their General Educational Development (GED), and youth noted that more support would greatly benefit members.

*“Things like [programs to help members get their GED], I’m looking forward to seeing more things like that... happening inside of REACH so they can reach out to more youth.”*

*— Member Currently Attending Community College Part-Time and Working*

## **Support Getting Internships + Applying for Jobs and/or College**

Youth reported receiving encouragement and support from REACH staff in finding jobs and internships at REACH.

*“I feel like [REACH staff] has been a big help, for me and my sister. For example, [REACH staff] helped my sister apply to a college and she helped my sister get her first job, and she’s still trying to help her. And for me, she’s trying to help me with my resume so I can start looking for a job.”*

*— 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Member*

# YOUTH EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF FINANCIAL SECURITY

## Financial Hardships at Home + Impact on Academic Performance

Across the four focus groups, REACH members in every age group expressed concern about their future financial stability, often in part because of financial hardship and financial insecurity they noted at home. The concept of financial stability influences many of their academic interests and performance, including how they define success in high school, how well they perform in school, and how they articulate their aspirations for jobs and careers post-high school.

## Youth Interest in Financial Independence + Housing

Youth in every age group emphasized the importance of reducing their family's financial burdens, both now and later in adulthood. Consequently, many of the youth expressed a desire for financial independence and an interest in learning skills related to personal finances, including:

- Money management and budgeting
- How to fill out W-4 and I-9 forms
- How to file taxes and maximize your returns

In addition to learning how to navigate their personal finances, REACH members were also interested in the topic of housing. Housing costs have skyrocketed in the Bay Area in recent years, adding more financial strain to low-income families and communities. Consequently, REACH members expressed a strong interest in learning how to find reasonably priced housing and how to be able to pay for it for it later in adulthood.

*"I just did my [taxes] on my own for the first time this year... But having more information about that would be helpful. Also credit, what building credit looks like, how to actually manage your finances... Those are things I wish I knew how to do when I was younger so that when I did have money, I could take care of it and make it last."*

*— Transitional Age Youth Member Not Currently in School*

## Interest in Gaining Job-Related Skills + Knowledge of Career Options

Because many REACH members aspire to be financially independent in adulthood, many youth expressed an interest in learning more about job skills and career options. They explained that they would like to learn how to put together a resume, how to apply for a job, how to navigate a job interview, and how to get experience working. Some of the youth were interested in entrepreneurship, and how to run a business (such as a hair salon, for example), and having a steady stream of income. The concept of being financially secure shaped many of their career goals and aspirations. A majority of the youth in the focus groups aspire to have a high paying job (e.g., doctor, lawyer, or nurse). In order to pursue those high paying careers, a number of the youth explained that they planned to find a job after high school in order to save money to be able to afford college.

*"I'm thinking of going to cosmetology school... I do want to run my own business when I get older... Right now, I'm doing side hustles. I'm not struggling, I just like to have cash [to be worry free] and treat myself here and there."*

*— 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Member*

# YOUTH LACK INFORMATION ABOUT OPTIONS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

## Lack of Understanding of High School Graduation Requirements

Youth also described a lack of knowledge of the requirements needed to graduate high school (which is the first step in pursuing many of the careers the youth expressed interest in). Many have not had meetings with their high school counselors to ensure they were on track to graduate. Many were not clear about the differences between courses needed to graduate high school and those needed to attend a UC/CSU. One student reported that despite receiving straight A's, she was not sure if she would be graduating because she was not aware she had not met her elective credit requirements until two weeks before her graduation. She explained that one of her teachers told her she could fulfill those credits by reporting her part-time job for credits, but she was unsure if her part-time job would provide her these needed credits to graduate.

## Lack of Information Regarding Job/Career Options + Steps/Prerequisites

When asked about future job and career interests, many youth were not yet decided or sure about their interests or options for future jobs or careers. Youth expressed interest in wanting to know more about their options after high school, and how to best prepare for those options. Youth also wanted to be able to do something they enjoy, and as a result, many expressed interest in more artistic careers and pursuits, including careers in music, media, art, and sports.

Youth across all focus groups explained their limited exposure and lack of information regarding their options for after high school. Many had caregivers/parents/family members/teachers/REACH staff members who encouraged them to attend college or get a high-earning job (e.g., doctor, lawyer, nurse), but many youth did not know the necessary steps to take to apply for college, or the educational background and training particular careers require. For example, when asked, most youth did not know that doctors needed to complete an undergraduate degree, a medical degree, and a residency to specialize. And while a number of youth expressed interest in pursuing nursing, they were not familiar with specific requirements or options within the nursing field. Youth described being interested in having opportunities to talk with people from a range of professions and trades as well as having more information about the educational pre-requisites required to explore professions and trades.

*"I have no [long-term] goal. I just want to finish high school, go to college, and that's it."*

*— 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Member*

*"After high school what am I interested in? Nothing. I have no goal. I just want to finish high school, go to college, and that's it."*

*— 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Member*

## Limited Familiarity with Options for Higher Education (After High School)

There were many differing opinions among the youth about whether they wanted to attend college and if so, when, as well as whether college was necessary for their career aspirations. Most youth expressed reservations regarding college, due to its cost and uncertainty related to getting into college and succeeding once there. Many of the youth reported that while they were interested in attending college but planned (or expected to) need to take some time off after high school to work and save money in order to be able to attend college.

*"I hear a lot of both, 'college is good,' [and] 'college is bad.' ...I want to make a good decision. [The] last thing [I want to do is] regret my decision [about something that requires so much time and money]."*

*— Transition Age Youth Not Currently in School*

Across all ages, youth identified Chabot College as a common community college of interest. This is likely a result of proximity, as it is located in Hayward. Middle school students reported having heard of Chabot College and stated they would likely attend in the future. Older youth, especially 12th graders and TAY, talked more concretely about going to Chabot College (i.e., they had already applied or were currently enrolled there).

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## YOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT & PROGRAMS

REACH members shared the following suggestions for REACH (including specific types of assistance and programming that they think REACH should consider offering in the future).

1. **Lower youth-to-staff ratios:** Youth noted that they felt REACH staff were stretched thin, and that a greater youth-to-staff ratio would benefit both staff and the youth. Likewise, a greater youth-to-staff ratio would allow youth and REACH staff to form closer relationships and stronger support systems.
2. **Mentors + life coaches:** Across all focus groups, youth were interested in having individual mentors (or mentors with only a few mentees) and life coaches. The youth emphasized that having someone to guide them and provide support throughout their high school and college careers would be extremely beneficial. By having a personal mentor or life coach, they could develop a close relationship with a role model that they could come to for additional advice and support outside of their school and home.
3. **Testimonies from older or past REACH Members:** Many of the youth (especially the youth in middle school) were interested in testimonies from older REACH members who benefitted from and utilized REACH resources, so that they can consider how to best make use of the resources REACH has to offer.
4. **More information on REACH resources:** Youth expressed interest in more information about the range of resources available to them at REACH, especially related to paid internships and jobs. Most youth had heard of possible internships from REACH staff or friends but did not have a clear understanding of how to apply for an internship.
5. **Provide workshops on a range of topics** including mental health, procrastination, personal finance, job options and career pathways:
  - **Mental health:** Some of the youth discussed their struggles with mental health and depression, and how that has impacted their education. Similarly, youth reported difficulty at home, and how those difficult home situations made it difficult to navigate school and their aspirations for college:
  - **Procrastination:** Many youth expressed challenges with procrastination. The youth described a range of factors that contribute to their procrastination, including distractions at home and feeling anxiety and/or uncertainty regarding many aspects of their schoolwork — including how to choose courses and how to complete school assignments. The youth suggested that REACH could provide workshops that explore strategies to tackle procrastination and discuss tools youth can develop and use to create healthy study habits (as well as provide support to other REACH members).
6. **Provide evening/weekend hours + programming for older members:** The older youth expressed an interest in keeping REACH open later to accommodate and attract older REACH members. This would also allow youth to have a safe place to gather in the late afternoons.
7. **Provide additional opportunities to explore career opportunities:** Youth noted the importance of job fairs and support to explore possible career options

*“I’ve been doing informational interviews to kind of meet with people [who work in the field I’m interested in]*

*and asking them what kind of educational background they have and what routes they suggest I take as somebody [who] wants to go to college but only if its relevant to my career desires.”*

*— Transition Age Youth Not Currently in School*

**8. Provide additional opportunities for youth internships**

*“I want to do like an internship so it could look good... so like you know it could push further.”*

*— Transition Age Youth Not Currently in School*

**9. Consider dedicating a space in REACH for youth to do homework and to get additional academic support**

## EVALUATOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Increase middle school student awareness of high school options**
- **Expose young people to critical thinking:** For example, gaining awareness and skills related to thinking critically about fake news, data sources, etc.
- **Expand opportunities to a range of post-high school options**
- **Expand opportunities for paid internships**
- **Explore the possibility of establishing volunteer mentors** (e.g., for youth 18+)