



# Components of High-Quality Summer Youth Employment Programs

MAY 2025

*Sarah Salimi  
Ivonne Garcia*

**S**ummer youth employment programs (SYEPs) have the potential to serve as critical bridges to promising careers, especially for young people who hail from disadvantaged backgrounds or reside in underserved areas. Summer jobs can provide early exposure to professional environments, equipping participants with essential skills for the workplace, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. However, there is still much to learn about what makes these programs most effective, underscoring a need for funders, policymakers, and practitioners to identify and share best practices for meaningful summer employment experiences. Common challenges include the limited duration of summer, constrained program budgets, difficulties establishing employer engagement, and obstacles to collaboration with schools.

As part of an evaluation of a JPMorganChase philanthropic effort to support SYEPs throughout the United States, MDRC conducted over 30 interviews with staff members at grantee programs in 2023 and 2024.<sup>1</sup> This brief is the synthesis of those conversations as well as 13 interviews with policy experts, along with a literature review.<sup>2</sup> This work represents a practitioner-informed understanding of the practices that are believed to improve youth outcomes in this understudied field. Box 1 provides a summary of the findings, including recommendations for a successful SYEP.



## What Constitutes a High-Quality Summer Youth Employment Program?

SYEPs are primarily workforce development programs, meaning they are intended to prepare young people — often from families with low incomes — to one day enter the workplace and pursue upwardly mobile careers. Effective programs help participants develop essential professional skills, such as communication with supervisors, conflict resolution, problem-solving, and business etiquette. These soft — or durable — skills aim to provide young people the same repertoire of competencies that their more privileged peers pick up as a matter of course through their social networks.

Professional exposure is another core component of a high-quality SYEP. Activities such as job shadowing, career fairs, and lunch-and-learn events introduce young people to a broad set of careers and provide a sense of the educational trajectories required. The most direct exposure and intense learning opportunities are found in employment itself. Work experiences include internships, full and part-time jobs, and apprenticeships. Participants learn how to apply for a position and what the hiring process entails. Once “on the job,” a workplace supervisor can monitor a participant’s progress and indicate areas for growth. Regular mentoring by both supervisors and SYEP staff members is critical for summer employees to successfully navigate — and learn from — what are often their first work experiences.

The most rigorous SYEPs find ways to connect summer employment to the larger trajectories of young lives. This guidance may involve conversations with students about what they have learned

*Effective programs help participants develop essential professional skills, such as communication with supervisors, conflict resolution, problem-solving, and business etiquette.*

### Box 1. Findings

MDRC’s ongoing study of the JPMorganChase SYEP portfolio has begun to distill distinct features of a high-quality summer youth employment program: strong relationships with employers, job-readiness training, and mentoring and advising (including by work-site supervisors), in combination with mechanisms to facilitate learning year-round, such as school partnerships.

Recommendations for a successful SYEP are:

1. Partner with schools to lengthen the time horizon for training.
2. Draw on materials and knowledge from more established programs to make the most efficient use of valuable staff member time and energy.
3. Establish employer-relationship teams to connect with hard-to-reach employers in high-demand sectors and make creative job placements.
4. Focus on the value that a summer program can add when approaching schools that already have their own internship programs.

and avenues to extend that learning, often in the form of advising about coursework or other work experiences to pursue over the academic year, as well as education to consider after high school. SYEPs sometimes formalize relationships with schools or school districts so that they can follow their participants over multiple school years, working with administrators to embed soft-skills training in the academic curriculum and offer additional enrichment opportunities.

## Challenges and Potential Solutions

As with any enterprise, summer youth employment programs face a number of challenges that can hinder the implementation of best practices, but practitioners are finding solutions.

### The Challenge: *Time Limits*

---

As seasonal programs, SYEPs have a brief window of time – generally only four to eight weeks – to both prepare and place participants. It can be challenging to position young people for jobs or internships and then get them oriented and trained with enough time remaining for a meaningful work experience. Some industries, such as finance and technology, require lengthy onboarding processes for legal and security reasons that can include background checks and extensive paperwork. All these demands make for a busy summer and leave little time for SYEPs to tack on enhancements, such as opportunities for students to train for and earn industry-recognized credentials in their fields of interest.

### A Potential Solution: *Build Partnerships with Schools*

To increase their impact, SYEPs can partner with local school districts to provide support for program participants beyond the summer. Developing these valuable connections often requires funding for a SYEP staff member to interface with schools over the academic year. As with employer engagement, it does take time to build trust with stakeholders, but SYEPs that collaborate with schools are able to provide more cohesive work-based learning experiences such as monthly soft-skills training. Not only do students gain more skills, they can better appreciate how their work over the summer is connected to what they are doing during the academic year – rather than experiencing the two as disjointed activities.

School partnerships can prepare students to enter SYEPs at a higher level, with some eligible for more advanced internships. For example, by operating its own SYEP, the Broward County Public Schools system in Florida is able to fuse academic and career programs. The school system's employer partners note that Broward students are well prepared because they benefit not just from the work readiness gained through the SYEP, but also from monthly career-development sessions with career advisers during the school year. Furthermore, students can receive academic credit for summer internships, an additional incentive for participation.

## The Challenge: *Limited Resources*

---

Funding constraints can restrict the variety and extent of programs and services offered by SYEPs and create tension between maximizing the number of participants and optimizing the experiences of a smaller cohort. Many SYEPs have had to determine how to split finite resources to cover staff time spent on youth advising, soft-skills training, and engagement with employers and schools. Another common expense is participant wages when the program works with small businesses or nonprofit organizations that cannot afford to offer paid internships, and there can be additional costs, such as for field trips and career fairs. Given already overstretched budgets, SYEPs don't generally have the funding to extend the summer experience.

## A Potential Solution: *Build on Existing Resources*

To free staff members to focus on the essentials of advising, internship preparation, and employer and school relations, rather than starting from scratch, SYEPs can take advantage of preexisting resources created by other programs. Many more established SYEPs have already developed materials such as hiring and orientation playbooks for both employers and young people, and even curricula. Some of these tools may be publicly available, and programs can gain access to others through networking – attending practitioner conferences, emailing staff members at other SYEPs directly, or building connections through common partners.

YouthForce NOLA, launched in 2015 in New Orleans by a group of local organizations, designed a soft-skills curriculum to develop 35 competencies, including building confidence, navigating resources, and building relationships with supervisors. Through professional development sessions, the curriculum has been packaged and taught to schools and other organizations that serve young people. YouthForce NOLA also has employer playbooks explaining how to communicate with young employees and preempt common challenges in orientation and training. SYEPs that adopt an existing curriculum such as YouthForce NOLA's can save staff time that can then go toward developing student advising and enlisting student employers.

## The Challenge: *Hard-to-Reach Employers*

---

Internship opportunities in fields that align with young people's interests or offer a distinct career pathway are particularly valuable, but in-demand employer partners may only be willing to take on a limited number of young employees. Employers can have legal concerns about employing minors, questions about the quality of young people's work, and too few supervisors with the time to oversee young people (especially in the era of remote and hybrid work). Furthermore, as a handful of SYEPs noted, employer partners only have so much capacity for summer employees – especially when they have existing agreements with local school districts to hire student interns as part of career and technical education (CTE) programs.

SYEP staff members must devote time to adjust employer relationships year after year to reflect the preferences of incoming groups of young people, an effort that becomes more time-intensive with more partners.

### ***A Potential Solution: Establish Employer-Relationship Teams and Be Creative***

Investing in an employer-relationship team of at least a few people can help ensure a steady pipeline of job placements. Without dedicated funding for this role, the quantity and quality of placements that SYEPs make will suffer. Boston Private Industry Council (the PIC), for example, employs five employer-engagement managers to recruit employers that value a broad talent pool and are willing to offer high school students paid jobs and internships. The PIC team works year-round to prepare both students and employers for summer internships, emphasizing the soft-skills training, interview preparation, and matching process that students have undergone. They also assure potential employers that they can interview interested students and select the candidates they prefer, as with any hire. The goal is to provide students and employers with agency in the hiring process.

UNITE-LA's SYEP program has similar aims. At UNITE-LA, the workforce team of 15 is supported by 3 employer-engagement specialists, who cultivate and maintain relationships with potential employers in the tech, clean tech, and healthcare fields. Together, they ensure that students are connected to employers that appreciate the valuable contributions they bring to their organizations.

Placements are often informed by labor market data about what is considered an “in-demand” sector in the local or national economies. This information can come from chambers of commerce, local government officials, community-based organizations, consultants, and online research. When there is a dearth of opportunities in a particularly popular field or existing partners are at capacity, employer-relationship teams can look for innovative placements. For example, when students who are interested in finance can't find a position at a financial institution, they may instead be placed in the finance department at a corporation or small business. Students interested in nursing who are unable to shadow nurses may instead be assigned to shadow providers in a hospital's patient-services division.

### ***The Challenge: Schools Are Separate Entities***

---

Schools and SYEPs operate on different calendars, and in decentralized districts, schools themselves may not operate on identical schedules, complicating coordination — already a challenge for SYEP staff members, who must manage both school and employer calendars. Schools that have workplace-learning curricula and internships in place as part of established CTE pathway programs may not want to coordinate their activities with external programs. These complications and constraints when seeking to partner with schools may make it harder for some SYEPs to ensure that their participants have cohesive career experiences that extend past the summer.

## A Potential Solution: *Lead with the Value that the SYEP Can Add*

In situations where schools already provide internships or local employers have no capacity for additional openings, it may not make sense for SYEPs to run separate programs. To avoid being seen as the competition and duplicating efforts, SYEPs can offer their services in support of existing summer work programs. For example, staff members might offer soft-skills training to schools to better prepare their students for internships or share best practices for advising young people and workplace supervisors to ensure supportive and mutually beneficial experiences.

SYEPs can also support schools by introducing their staff members to employers and community-based organizations in the program's networks, which can increase the number and expand the variety of the school's summer placements. This practice not only serves students, it can go a long way toward boosting the trust schools place in SYEPs. For example, Futures and Options, a youth career-development organization in New York City, partners closely with New York City Public Schools (NYCPS). The two have drawn on Futures and Options' relationships in the healthcare sector to expand field trip and internship opportunities for students participating in certain NYCPS work-based learning programs.

## Conclusion

SYEPs are promising vehicles to help young people with disadvantages expand their horizons both educationally and professionally, aiming to provide training in soft skills and exposure to potential careers. Adviser support is essential to help participants navigate challenging workplace situations and make plans to extend their experiences beyond the summer with schooling and additional internships. While certain challenges are ever-present — summer's short duration, limited resources, hard-to-reach employers, and coordination with schools over the academic year — SYEPs can experiment with the recommendations outlined in this brief to make best use of existing resources and develop creative solutions.

## Notes and References

1. More background on MDRC's evaluation with JPMorganChase, including findings from the first year of the study, can be found on the project page (website: <https://www.mdrc.org/work/projects/evaluation-jpmorgan-chases-summer-youth-employment-program>).
2. Six of the named experts were internal to MDRC and seven came from the broader field.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank our partners at JPMorganChase for their thoughtful contributions to the development of this brief, in particular Laura Mutis and Matthew Muench. We also thank our MDRC colleagues Dan Bloom and John Martinez, who reviewed drafts and provided valuable comments; Alexandra Bernardi and Lauren Lee, who assisted with brainstorming and fact-checking; Alyson Metzger, who edited this brief; and Ann Kottner and Carolyn Thomas, who prepared it for publication. Finally, we express our deep gratitude to the summer youth employment program administrators and practitioners participating in our research project for allowing us to learn from their knowledge and experiences.

The following organizations support dissemination of MDRC publications and our efforts to communicate with policymakers, practitioners, and others: Arnold Ventures, Ascendium Education Group, Yield Giving/MacKenzie Scott, and earnings from the MDRC Endowment. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

For information about MDRC and copies of our publications, see our website: [www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org).

Copyright © 2025 by MDRC®. All rights reserved.

**New York**  
200 Vesey Street, 23rd Flr.  
New York, NY 10281  
Tel: 212 532 3200

**Washington, DC**  
750 17th Street, NW  
Suite 501  
Washington, DC 20006

**Oakland**  
475 14th Street, Suite 750  
Oakland, CA 94612  
Tel: 510 663 6372

