



Boston's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth Program Policy Principles for Fiscal Year 2026-2028

MISSION

The mission of the Office of Workforce Development (OWD) is to promote the full participation of all Boston residents in the city's economic vitality and future. Our purpose is to be an advocate, clearinghouse, and laboratory for "best practices" in literacy, beginning at birth; lifelong learning; job training/placement; and support services so Bostonians may fulfill their educational and employment aspirations.

OVERVIEW

In keeping with OWD's mission, we administer federal, state, and local funds to foster career pathway development. We make these funds available via competitive grantmaking processes to support community-based organizations involved in job training, adult education, ESOL, and related activities.

One such source is the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth funding. WIOA Youth funding is a US Department of Labor formulary grant for youth facing education, training, and employment barriers. Information and resources on WIOA Youth are available on the Department of Labor's website. OWD manages WIOA Youth funding in partnership with the Boston MassHire Workforce Board and its Youth Council, and under the supervision of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development.

The purpose of this document is to outline the vision, goals, and policies that will govern the expenditure of WIOA Youth funds in Boston in the coming three years (FY 2026-2028). These policies have been developed in consultation with stakeholders and will be posted for public comment in December 2024-January 2025. These policy principles and the resulting feedback will inform the release of a Request for Grant Applications (RFGA) to be released in early Spring 2025. Under this RFGA, organizations will be eligible for up to three years of funding on this schedule: FY26, the open and competitive year during which applications may be submitted by all eligible entities, FY27, the first year of refunding open only to awardees from the previous year, and FY 28, the second year of potential refunding.

VISION, PRINCIPLES, AND SYSTEMWIDE GOALS

The vision for Boston's WIOA Youth funding is to support a coordinated network of services that transitions out-of-school youth¹ ages 18-24 towards career-oriented education, training, and employment. We will prioritize services – including stabilization and support for basic needs – designed to meet the needs of youth with the highest barriers to employment and training.

Five key principles that will guide the selection of funded programs are summarized below and expanded upon in the following section.

1. Programs are framed around a multi-step intervention model;
2. Programs have well-defined and robust transition processes to the post-program step;
3. Program policies and protocols are evidence-based and appropriate for the population;
4. Youth are on a pathway to the attainment of post-secondary credentials needed for employment in high-demand occupations;
5. Programs leverage multiple internal and external partnerships to ensure the integration of high-quality, youth-focused services.

In addition, we seek comment on the goals OWD staff will use to guide ongoing engagement with the sector, to prioritize our own work, and to inform our proposed WIOA Youth expenditures. These systemwide goals are as follows:

- Youth are on a pathway to and through post-secondary education or training;
- Youth have access to evidence-based services designed to eliminate barriers to employment and training;
- Youth have access to timely, high-quality, and specialized services representing the required [14 program elements](#) stipulated by WIOA, particularly stabilization services;
- OWD and providers have meaningful and high-quality data to improve services and outcomes for youth;
- We invest time, money, and staff resources in building a coordinated system with connections both between organizations and linkages to broader networks of economic opportunity.

¹ Out-of-School Youth is defined as not attending any school (as defined under State law) and experiencing one or more of the following 1) A school dropout 2) A recipient of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent who is a low-income individual and is either basic skills deficient or an English language learner 3) An offender 4) A homeless individual, a homeless child or youth, or a runaway 5) In foster care or has aged out of the foster care system, a child eligible for assistance under sec. 477 of the Social Security Act 6) Pregnant or parenting 7) An individual with a disability 8) A low-income individual who requires additional assistance to enter or complete an educational program or to secure or hold employment.

STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

We fund programs that are designed to place out-of-school youth ages 18-24 years on a pathway toward post-secondary attainment or career-level employment. We focus on serving youth with the highest barriers to employment and training. The following principles will guide the selection of programs.

1. Programs are framed around a multi-step intervention model

We fund multi-step interventions, with each phase culminating in the achievement of a substantive education, training, or developmental milestone in its entirety. Figure 1 illustrates this concept, although the program activities associated with each step can be structured in a sequential, concurrent, or non-sequential manner, as dictated by the needs of an individual student. We prioritize program models that intervene at the earliest stage of the education and training pathway and move youth through at least two complete steps. Each step must have a clear strategy and direction, along with well-defined metrics and transition points into the subsequent program or post-program step. Intensive case management and access to specialized support services must be ongoing. Programs that do not progress youth through a minimum of two steps (for example, stand-alone GED or short-term certificate programs) will not be considered for funding. A set of example activities supports the objectives that correspond to each step in Figure 1.

We encourage partnerships to deliver core services. Examples of multi-step program designs include:

- A post-secondary program that embeds a GED/HiSet program
- A contextualized GED/HiSET program that is integrated with a college/university bridge program
- A work-based education or learning program that transitions youth to a registered apprenticeship
- A remedial education and work readiness program that pipelines into an employer-funded, paid training program

Effective program designs have multiple entry and exit points to ensure accessibility for youth with various needs. Program services should be flexible and highly individualized to address the specific needs and circumstances of each youth, which are unique, wide-ranging, and vary over time.

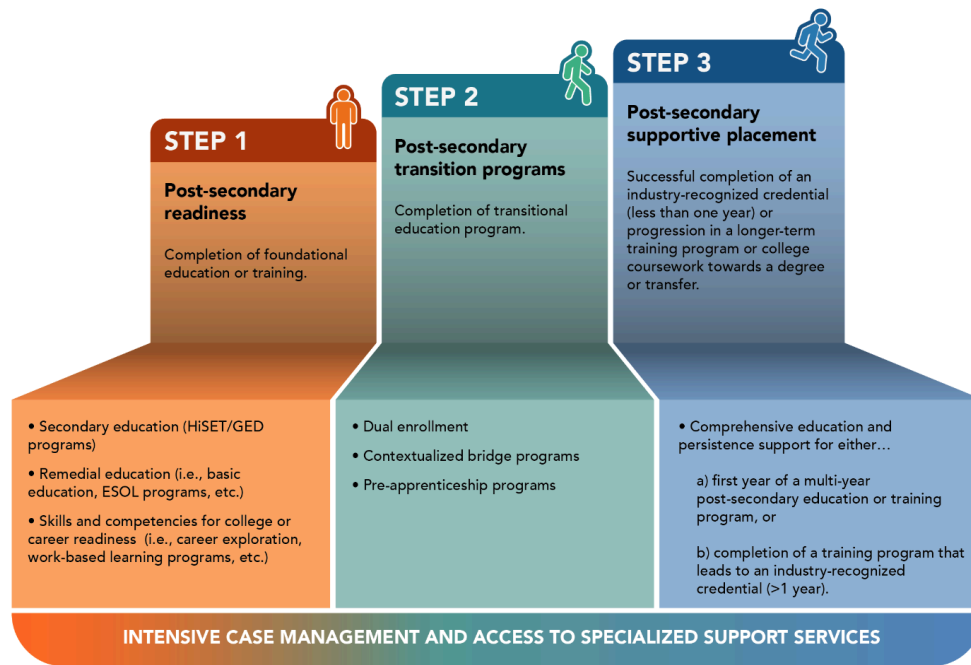


Figure 1. Multi-step pathway (min. two levels for WIOA funding)

2. **Programs have well-defined and robust transition processes to the post-program step:** Programs must coordinate with relevant partners to deliver an integrated set of activities designed to promote the participant's successful transition into the next stage of their career path. For example, program models that move youth through Step 2 should have well-defined steps and processes to ensure youth progress to an industry-recognized training program or college enrollment. Likewise, programs that carry WIOA Youth to or through an industry-recognized training program (Step 3) must demonstrate actions to facilitate appropriate and timely transition into training-related employment or specify a comprehensive set of activities that ensure youth's continued retention and success in training or education programs that lasts longer than one year. In addition, programs should demonstrate how these processes reflect best practices in transitioning and retaining the chosen population in post-secondary education or career employment.
3. **Program policies and protocols are evidence-based and appropriate for the population:** Interventions should be based on the most current knowledge of meaningful and effective programming for out-of-school youth. Programs that incorporate the following evidence-based approaches will be prioritized:
 - a. The intentional use of technology and interactive media to support learning and program activities
 - b. Culturally competent and trauma-informed programming and case management
 - c. Financial incentives, including stipends, incentives, wages, and other conditional cash transfers for a range of purposes - from programs that allow participants to 'earn' while they 'learn' to small incentive payments that reward achievement of programmatic

milestones. Innovative earn-and-learn programs that target traditionally underserved youth populations are strongly encouraged.

4. ***Youth are on a pathway to the attainment of post-secondary credentials needed for employment in high-demand occupations:*** We prioritize program models that transition youth from an early pathway step into an education or training program that leads to a high-value credential. This includes AA/BA level degree programs, apprenticeships, and occupational training programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials necessary to enter middle-skill careers with strong earning potential. Stackable credentials, which permit on-ramps and off-ramps when credential attainment matches the youth's ability and/or career aspirations, are strongly encouraged.
5. ***Programs leverage multiple internal and external partnerships to ensure the integration of high-quality, youth-focused services:*** Collaborative and coordinative partnerships are central to the success of WIOA Youth programs, as demonstrated by the [statutorily required 14 program elements](#). Programs are expected to demonstrate partnerships with youth-serving systems, including education institutions, juvenile justice systems, housing providers, MassHire career centers, and community-based organizations. Programs that do not directly provide the fourteen elements listed must demonstrate the ability to collaborate with other organizations to ensure participants can access the full continuum of services. In addition, we seek programs with strong connections to ancillary service providers, especially mental health, housing, disability services, and social service providers. Programs are asked to identify and document strategies to co-enroll youth in complementary programs offered by Boston Youth Services Network (BYSN) providers.

CAPACITY BUILDING FOR PROVIDERS

Each year we set aside a portion of WIOA Youth funds to support a compliance Specialist to centralize and standardize data entry for the WIOA youth programs and a coordinator for the Boston Youth Services Network (BYSN). BYSN brings together youth-serving programs in the Boston area to deepen connections amongst programs and to broader networks of opportunity.

BYSN members collaborate to create education, training, and job opportunities for young people. BYSN provides a space for discussions on best practices among a wider network of youth-focused organizations. Monthly meetings allow members to share resources, build connections, and support the unique needs and career goals of young people. Programs are encouraged to attend these monthly meetings and connect with partners in the network. BYSN will continue to evolve in response to the feedback of partner organizations.

PRIORITY POPULATIONS

Boston's WIOA Youth program aims to serve out-of-school youth ages 18-24 years old, with a focus on these specific youth populations:

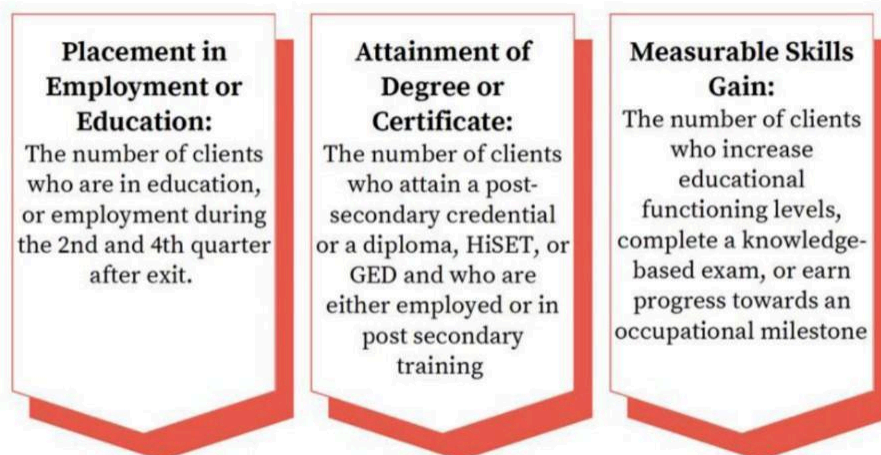
- Low-income youth with English reading, writing, or computing skills at or below the 8th-grade level as assessed on a generally accepted standardized test; or English Language Learners; Boston Housing Authority (BHA) residents and residents utilizing a housing voucher; residents of a high-poverty area; court-involved; homeless including those experiencing housing instability or residence inconsistency outside of the federal McKinney-Vento definition; runaway; in foster care, or aged out of the foster care system; pregnant or parenting; youth with a disability; young men of color; documented immigrant youth.

The term 'out-of-school' youth includes individuals who are— (i) not attending any school and (ii) one or more of the following: (I) A school dropout. (II) A youth within the age of compulsory school attendance but has not attended school for at least the most recent complete school year calendar quarter.

PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Organizations will be required to meet both standard and enhanced WIOA performance measures. Standard WIOA Youth measures are negotiated each year between OWD and the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development. Programs should read the [WIOA performance and accountability guidance](#) published August 23, 2017, in TEG 10-16 Change 1 for details on required performance measures. Enhanced performance measures are outcomes that align with Boston's local strategic objectives, such as the percentage of youth placed in post-secondary education/training at the exit, the percentage achieving post-secondary credentials, the percentage placed in middle-skill level career jobs at exit, etc.

While performance goals are subject to negotiation, here is an example of trackable metrics for programs:



Further history of Boston's performance can be found in the MassWorkforce WIOA performance information issuances.

Note that while programs will be held accountable for meeting performance measures, OWD seeks to ensure that all youth needs are met to the best of the program's ability through the depth and breadth of services provided, not the number of youth served.

Requirements for Grant Recipients

The administration of WIOA Youth funds requires detailed financial and programmatic reporting. In soliciting grant applications, we seek evidence that prospective grantees are well suited to carry out these aspects of the grant. Programs may provide the services themselves or leverage the services of a partner agency:

- Experience managing a federal grant with rigorous compliance requirements in terms of eligibility, database management, and performance outcomes tracking
- Applicants should have multiple funding sources to support the specific proposed initiative described in their grant application
- Connection to programs that serve the target population, particularly those that provide stabilization and other specialized support supports
- Ability to partner with other organizations to provide a full set of education, youth development, and work experiences for youth participants comprehensive specialized services
- Ability to provide culturally and linguistically competent programs and services
- Offering work experience both during and after the program