

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From July 1995 through September 2001, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and The Ford Foundation (Ford) operated a demonstration of the Quantum Opportunity Program (QOP). QOP offered intensive and comprehensive services to help at-risk youth graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education or training. The QOP demonstration included several features of Workforce Investment Act (WIA) youth programs, and findings from the demonstration might provide some insight about the implementation challenges that such WIA programs will encounter and the potential effectiveness of those programs.

The QOP demonstration targeted youth with low grades entering high schools with high dropout rates. Randomly selected eligible youth were enrolled in QOP and served even if they transferred to other schools, dropped out of school, became incarcerated, or became inactive in QOP for a long time. QOP's primary goals were to increase the rates of high school graduation and enrollment in postsecondary education or training. Its secondary goals were to improve high school grades and achievement test scores and to reduce risky behaviors, such as substance abuse, crime, and teen parenting.

QOP was mainly an after-school program providing case management and mentoring, supplemental education, developmental activities, community service activities, supportive services, and financial incentives. These services were provided year-round for five years to enrollees who had not graduated from high school, and were designed to be comprehensive enough to address all barriers to success and to be intensive. The program model specified roughly 15 to 25 enrollees per case manager, and it prescribed an annual participation goal of 750 hours for each enrollee who had not graduated. From graduation to the end of the demonstration, enrollees who had graduated received limited services—some mentoring and assistance with enrolling in postsecondary education or training.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) in seven sites operated QOP demonstration programs. Five sites—Cleveland, Fort Worth, Houston, Memphis, and Washington, D.C.—were funded by DOL. Four of the five served 100 youth each, and the Washington, D.C., site served 80 youth. The other two sites—Philadelphia and Yakima—served 50 youth each with funding from Ford. DOL has also funded an evaluation of the QOP demonstration. By the end of the demonstration, enrollees were in a variety of statuses, including attending college or another postsecondary training program, still attending high school, attending a general educational development (GED) certification program, working after finishing high school, and working or unemployed after dropping out of high school.

The purpose of this report is to present the short-term impacts of QOP. To estimate impacts, we translated each program goal, such as high school graduation, into a quantifiable outcome, such as whether a youth graduated from high school. We measured each outcome for a group of youth enrolled in QOP and a group of statistically identical youth, called the control group. We formed the QOP group and the control group at the start of the demonstration by randomly assigning each youth eligible for the program to one group or the other. All members of the QOP group were enrolled in QOP.

Members of the control group were not allowed to participate in QOP and, thus, show what would have happened to the enrollees had they not been enrolled.

The impact of QOP on the enrolled youth is the difference between the average outcome for the group of QOP enrollees and the average outcome for the control group. The impacts are short-term impacts because we estimated them from data collected during the fourth and fifth years of the demonstration, that is, before the demonstration was over and when many youth were either still attending high school or had only recently graduated. Longer-term impacts, which may be a more appropriate basis for policy decisions, might be more or less beneficial than the short-term impacts presented in this report. To measure longer-term impacts, DOL is having us collect data in fall 2002 and fall 2004. The fall 2002 data collection is roughly seven years after the youth in the demonstration sample entered the ninth grade and two years after the end of the QOP demonstration.

### **The QOP Target Group and Program Model**

The target group in the QOP demonstration was youth entering the ninth grade in fall 1995 (1996 in the Washington, D.C., site) who met the following criteria:

- Began the ninth grade at a high school selected for the QOP demonstration. Each high school had a dropout rate of 40 percent or more.
- Were not repeating the ninth grade.
- Were not so physically disabled or learning disabled that participation in the program would not have been appropriate, as determined by the school.
- Had a grade point average (GPA) below the 67<sup>th</sup> percentile among the students meeting the first three requirements at the participating high school. (The GPA was calculated from grades received in the eighth grade.)

The QOP model consisted of four primary components: (1) case management and mentoring, (2) education, (3) developmental activities, and (4) community service. Secondary aspects of the program model included financial incentives—stipends, accrual accounts, enrollee bonuses, and staff bonuses—and supportive services—snacks, transportation assistance, and other services as needed. Compared to the models for most other youth programs, the QOP model required more intensive case management and mentoring in four ways:

1. Enrollees were to have greater access to case managers and were to be involved in more program activities for longer periods of time. Each case manager was to have a caseload of approximately 15 to 25 enrollees. The QOP model set a target of 250 hours per year for activities in each of three service components—education, developmental activities, and community service—for a total of 750 hours per year until an enrollee graduated from high school. Enrollees who took full advantage of QOP received services for five years. Most case managers were available during off hours for enrollees to call in emergencies.
2. Enrollees were to interact with case managers for longer periods of time because program eligibility was not contingent on enrollee behavior. Youth continued to be enrolled in QOP even if they transferred to another school, dropped out of school, became incarcerated, or

became inactive in QOP for a long time. In contrast to some other youth programs, QOP did not accept or retain only those youth who were sufficiently motivated to apply and actively participate. QOP's approach of enrolling all randomly selected eligible youth reflected the program's philosophy that the least-motivated youth might benefit the most from receiving help.

3. Enrollees were to receive more comprehensive services because the scope of case management called for addressing all barriers that enrolled youth faced. Case managers either addressed a barrier directly—by arranging transportation to program activities, for example—or referred the enrollee to another community resource, such as a substance abuse treatment program.
4. Enrollees were to receive services throughout school vacations and the summer. Enrollees who failed a class during the school year were encouraged to attend summer school. Case managers assisted other enrollees who were age 16 or older to find summer jobs. Developmental and community service activities continued throughout the summer for all enrollees.

Each of the other three components of the QOP model was geared toward achieving a specific program goal.

- ***Educational activities*** were intended to improve academic achievement, increase the likelihood of completing high school, and increase the likelihood of going on to college or some other postsecondary training program. After an academic assessment, which formed the basis of an individual education plan, educational services were to consist of one-on-one tutoring and computer-assisted instruction in specific coursework as well as in basic reading and mathematics. Educational services also included visiting nearby college campuses and other activities designed to promote awareness of and planning for college or other postsecondary training.
- ***Developmental activities*** were designed to reduce risky behaviors. They also promoted cultural awareness and provided recreation.
- ***Community service activities***, such as visiting the residents of a local nursing home or volunteering at a local food bank, were designed to help youth develop a sense of responsibility for the quality of life of others in their neighborhood.

The QOP model addressed numerous barriers to success by specifying that supportive services were to be provided either directly or indirectly through referrals to other resources in the community. QOP case managers referred enrollees to community health and mental health services; summer jobs programs; and local agencies that provide housing, food, income support, or child care.

In addition to supportive services, QOP provided youth with three types of financial incentives to attend program activities. The first was a stipend of approximately \$1.25 for every hour devoted to educational activities, developmental activities that were not purely recreational, and community service. A matching amount was deposited in an accrual account and promised to the enrollee when he or she earned a high school diploma or GED certificate and enrolled in college, a certified apprenticeship

program, an accredited vocational/technical training program, or the armed forces. Enrollees in some sites also received bonuses for completing major program activities.

QOP also provided financial incentives to program staff. The two Ford-funded sites compensated staff entirely through incentive payments based on the time enrollees spent on program activities, while some DOL-funded sites provided bonuses to staff based at least partly on enrollee participation.

## **Evaluation Methods**

At the start of the demonstration, we formed the QOP group and the control group by randomly assigning each of the nearly 1,100 youth eligible for the program to one group or the other. In the spring of the fourth academic year of the demonstration, we interviewed enrollees and control-group members in-person. The survey collected data on risky behaviors and factors that assist a youth in resisting negative influences in his or her social environment. At the same time, we administered achievement tests in reading and mathematics. Seven to ten months later, we conducted a telephone survey covering high school graduation, postsecondary activities, risky behaviors, and (for the enrollee group) attitudes toward QOP. Shortly thereafter, we requested transcripts from the high schools that sample members had attended since the beginning of the demonstration. From information provided by QOP staff, we measured how much enrollees participated in QOP.

After conducting the two surveys, administering the achievement tests, and collecting transcripts, we measured the impact of QOP on an outcome by subtracting the mean outcome for the control group from the mean outcome for the QOP group. Because the available data were obtained before the end of the demonstration and when many youth were either still attending high school or had only recently graduated, the impacts estimated from those data and presented in this report should be interpreted as short-term impacts for many of the outcomes considered, as noted above. The data that we collect in 2002 and 2004 will reveal whether QOP's longer-term impacts are more or less favorable than its short-term impacts.

## **Participation in QOP**

Despite QOP's goal of engaging a broad cross-section of eligible youth, most enrollees attended relatively few program activities.

- Enrollees spent an average of 174 hours per year on QOP activities—23 percent of the annual goal of 750 hours—through the first four years of the demonstration.
- Enrollees spent an average of 72 hours per year on education (29 percent of the goal), 76 hours on developmental activities (30 percent of the goal), and 26 hours on community service (11 percent of the goal).
- The average time spent on QOP activities fell steadily from 247 hours in the first year of the demonstration to 89 hours in the fourth year, while the fraction of enrollees spending no time at all on QOP activities rose steadily from 1 percent to 36 percent.
- The most dedicated enrollees—those spending at least 1,300 hours on QOP activities—tended to have higher grades at baseline (eighth grade), be younger when entering the ninth

grade, be in families receiving welfare, and be in families headed by a single parent. The most disenchanted enrollees—those spending 100 or fewer hours on QOP activities—tended to have lower baseline grades, be male, not speak English at home, and be older when entering the ninth grade.

- The most disenchanted enrollees reported being uninterested in QOP activities or having other after-school activities such as playing a sport, working, or caring for other family members.

## **Short-Term Impacts of QOP**

### **Primary Outcomes: High School Completion and Postsecondary Education or Training**

- **QOP increased by a statistically significant seven percentage points the likelihood that enrollees graduated from high school with a diploma.**
- **QOP increased the likelihood of engaging in postsecondary education or training, although the size and statistical significance of the impact depends on how this outcome was measured and how the impact was estimated.**
  - QOP significantly increased by six percentage points the likelihood of engaging in postsecondary education or training when education or training was defined to include college attendance, vocational or technical school attendance, apprenticeship enrollment, and armed forces enlistment. The impact became smaller and insignificant when this measure was either narrowed to include only college attendance or broadened to include employment. It also became smaller and insignificant when we used regression methods to adjust for random differences between the baseline characteristics of the QOP group and the control group.
  - When we included acceptance into college—in addition to current attendance at college—in the definition of postsecondary education or training, QOP significantly increased the likelihood of engaging in postsecondary education or training by six to nine percentage points for all but one measure of postsecondary activity.

### **Secondary Outcomes: High School Performance, Risky Behaviors, and Resiliency Factors**

- **QOP did not significantly improve enrollee performance while in high school.**
  - QOP did not significantly raise reading or mathematics achievement test scores or high school grades.
  - QOP did not significantly increase the number of credits earned by enrollees or reduce disciplinary actions taken against enrollees in high school.
- **QOP did not significantly reduce risky behaviors.**

- QOP did not significantly reduce any risky behavior, including gang activity, crime, and teen parenting.
  - According to data from the in-person survey, QOP significantly increased by seven percentage points the fraction of enrollees who had a drink and the fraction who used an illegal drug in the 30 days before the survey. However, some evidence suggests that there were differences between QOP enrollees and control-group youth in the accuracy with which they reported risky behaviors. Those differences might have contributed substantially to the estimated detrimental impacts on drinking and drug use. That QOP might not have increased drinking and drug use is also suggested by data from the telephone survey. According to those data, QOP had beneficial—but not significant—impacts on drinking and drug use.
- **QOP significantly increased one resiliency factor.**
    - QOP significantly increased by 31 percentage points the fraction of enrollees reporting participation in a special program that helped them. Nevertheless, slightly less than half (47 percent) of QOP enrollees reported participating in “special programs other than your normal high school classes ...[that try] to help students stay in school, make good grades, stay away from drugs, prepare for work or college, and make good decisions in life.” This might reflect the fact that participation in QOP activities fell substantially short of the program’s goal, especially by the fourth year of the demonstration when we asked the youth in the evaluation sample about their participation in special programs.
    - QOP did not significantly increase the likelihood that an enrollee perceived himself or herself as being positively influenced by a caring adult. It also did not significantly improve resiliency factors such as having an optimistic outlook on the future or believing that risky behaviors are wrong.

### **Short-Term Impacts on Subgroups**

- **QOP was more beneficial for enrollees in the middle of the eligible grade distribution than for enrollees at the top or bottom of the distribution.**
  - QOP had several significant impacts on enrollees in the middle third of the eligible grade distribution, and all of those impacts were beneficial. They included a 14-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of receiving a diploma, a 13-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of college attendance or acceptance, and an 8-percentage-point decrease in the likelihood of having a child.
  - QOP had both significant beneficial and detrimental impacts on enrollees in the bottom third of the distribution. It increased by 9 percentage points the likelihood of engaging in postsecondary education or training and decreased by 11 percentage points the likelihood of ever being arrested or charged with a crime. However, QOP also increased by 14 percentage points the likelihood of using an illegal drug.
  - QOP had only one significant impact—a detrimental impact—on enrollees in the top third of the distribution. It increased by eight percentage points the likelihood of binge drinking.

- QOP had significant beneficial impacts on both older and younger enrollees, and it did not consistently benefit one age group more than the other. (The older enrollees were over age 14 when they entered the ninth grade, whereas the younger enrollees were age 14 or younger.) The impact on younger enrollees was significantly different from the impact on older enrollees for just one outcome. QOP decreased by nine percentage points the fraction of younger enrollees who had a child. This impact was significantly different from both zero and the (insignificant) six-percentage-point increase in the fraction of older enrollees who had a child.
- Some of QOP’s impacts on females and some of its impacts on males were significantly different from zero. Although the significant impacts were beneficial for females and detrimental for males, QOP’s impact on females was significantly different from its impact on males for only one key outcome, the likelihood of engaging in postsecondary education or training, attending high school or a GED class, or working.

### Short-Term Impacts by Site

- **QOP’s impacts varied from site to site.** And, only one of the seven sites—the Cleveland site—had significant beneficial impacts and no significant detrimental impacts. The Cleveland site significantly increased the likelihood of graduating from high school, significantly increased the likelihood of attending or being accepted by a college, and significantly decreased the likelihood of binge drinking.
- **The impacts for the whole QOP demonstration were substantially—but not entirely—attributable to the impacts of the Philadelphia site alone or the Philadelphia and Yakima sites, the Ford-funded sites, together.**
  - The five DOL-funded sites together had one significant impact—they increased by seven percentage points the likelihood that a QOP enrollee graduated from high school. This impact on one of QOP’s primary outcomes was not significantly different from the impact for the two Ford-funded sites.
  - The Ford-funded sites had four significant beneficial impacts: a 2-percentile-point increase in the mathematics achievement test score, a 14-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of engaging in postsecondary education or training, a 17-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of engaging in postsecondary education or training or working at a good job, and a 14-percentage-point decrease in the likelihood of having a child.
  - The Ford-funded sites also had three significant detrimental impacts: 17-, 14-, and 16-percentage-point increases in the likelihood of engaging in binge drinking, using an illegal drug, and committing a crime, respectively. As discussed above, however, these detrimental impacts on risky behaviors might not have been attributable to QOP.

## Conclusions

- QOP achieved some short-term success in meeting its two primary goals of raising rates of high school completion and enrollment in postsecondary education or training. It had statistically significant beneficial impacts of modest size on at least some measures of both outcomes.
- QOP was not successful in meeting its secondary goals of improving grades and achievement test scores and reducing risky behaviors.
- QOP was not an effective resiliency factor. Although it significantly increased the fraction of enrollees participating in a program designed to help youth succeed in life, QOP did not improve enrollee's optimism about life or attitudes toward risky behaviors, and it did not reduce their risky behaviors.
- QOP was more beneficial in the short-run for enrollees in the middle of the eligible grade distribution than for enrollees at the top or bottom of the distribution.
- QOP's impacts varied from site to site, and the impacts for the whole QOP demonstration were substantially, but not entirely, attributable to the impacts of the Philadelphia site alone or the Philadelphia and Yakima sites (the Ford-funded sites) together. The DOL-funded sites significantly increased the likelihood of graduating from high school, one of QOP's primary goals, but had no other statistically significant impacts.
- Participation in QOP activities was substantially less than the program goal and declined steadily throughout the demonstration.

As noted, the impacts presented in this report are short-term impacts that we estimated from data collected during the fourth and fifth years of the demonstration, that is, before the demonstration was over and when many youth were either still attending high school or had only recently graduated. Longer-term impacts, which may be a more appropriate basis for policy decisions, might be more or less favorable than the short-term impacts. To measure longer-term impacts, DOL is having us collect data in fall 2002 and fall 2004. The fall 2002 data collection is roughly seven years after the youth in the demonstration sample entered the ninth grade and two years after the end of the QOP demonstration.