Strengthening Outreach and Services for Out-of-School Youth

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This brief provides practical guidance for professionals who identify, recruit, and support out-of-school youth (OSY) within the Migrant Education Program (MEP). OSY are among the most underserved and difficult-to-reach populations—they are often disconnected from traditional school systems and are balancing employment, family responsibilities, language acquisition, housing instability, and frequent mobility. Because OSY are not enrolled in school, they can be overlooked by school-based systems that typically trigger identification and referrals. As OSY navigate unfamiliar communities and systems, immediate priorities such as securing work, transportation, housing, and stability often take precedence over educational goals. As a result, readiness to participate in services may fluctuate based on work demands and living conditions.

Effective outreach and service delivery require more than simply offering services. They depend on relationship-centered approaches that recognize the realities of the lives of OSY; reduce barriers to participation; and provide practical, relevant support. In practice, this means designing services around youth schedules and communication preferences, not around institutional convenience.

Insights from former OSY, recruiters, advocates, and service providers consistently highlight a common message: Engagement grows when professionals build trust, show up consistently, follow through on commitments, and connect youth to services that align with both their immediate needs and their long-term aspirations. Follow-through is especially important because it shows youth that the program's commitments are real, helping youth trust that support will truly be there when they need it. Programs that meet youth where they are and respond with flexibility, empathy, and persistence are better positioned to foster meaningful relationships; sustain engagement; and help OSY pursue pathways toward educational, career, and personal success. The goal is not one-time contact but rather sustained connection that supports progress over time, even when participation is intermittent.

OSY Realities: Understanding Barriers That Interrupt Participation

To support OSY effectively, programs must understand and plan for the complex realities that can interrupt participation and limit access to educational, workforce, and support opportunities. Many youth balance long work hours, family responsibilities, and educational goals with little opportunity for rest, which makes consistent participation difficult. Transportation challenges and rural living conditions can further limit access to classes, training opportunities, appointments, and community resources. Even when programs are free, the indirect costs of participation (e.g., missed wages, travel time, child care) can make services feel out of reach.

Language barriers and cultural adjustment also create significant obstacles, particularly for new arrivals. Many OSY are simultaneously learning English and trying to navigate unfamiliar education systems, healthcare services, workforce expectations, and community resources. Feelings of isolation and uncertainty or a lack of trusted adults can discourage youth from seeking assistance, especially when they are unaware of available services or unsure how to access them. Clear, plain-language explanations, paired with step-by-step support, can reduce confusion and help youth follow through.

Frequent mobility adds another layer of disruption. Moves related to agricultural work, housing instability, or family circumstances can interrupt education, employment, and relationships with service providers. Each move often requires that youth rebuild support networks and reconnect with services from the beginning of the process, contributing to gaps in learning and reduced continuity of support.

Despite these challenges, OSY consistently demonstrate resilience, determination, and a strong commitment to their future goals. Highlighting these assets rather than the shortcomings can foster motivation and dignity, encouraging youth to keep going and believe in their ability to succeed. Many are motivated by a desire to support their families, learn English, complete their education, or pursue meaningful careers. Programs can build on these strengths by creating flexible, relationship-centered environments that provide practical support, consistent encouragement, and pathways that make participation and long-term success feel attainable.

Identification and Recruitment: Meeting OSY Where They Are

Effective identification and recruitment efforts are active, intentional, and strategically designed around where OSY spend their time and when they are

most accessible. Because OSY are not connected to school-based systems, school-centered recruitment strategies alone are often insufficient. Successful programs expand outreach to community spaces where youth naturally gather and spend time, including parks, laundromats, swap meets, markets, housing sites, community events, and other local hubs.

Employer-based recruitment is equally important. Building relationships with contractors, farmers, labor agencies, and employers can create valuable opportunities to connect with potentially eligible youth. Programs should look beyond traditional agricultural settings and explore partnerships with industries such as landscaping, construction, food processing, and other sectors that employ young workers. When engaging employers, clarify that services support youth success and stability and do not interfere with job performance or workplace operations.

Partnerships with community agencies, adult education programs, high school equivalency program professionals, workforce organizations, community colleges, and youth-serving organizations further strengthen recruitment efforts. Establishing referral processes and maintaining strong communication among partners can increase identification opportunities and ensure that youth are connected to needed services quickly and efficiently.

Technology and strategic timing can also enhance outreach efforts. Communicating through platforms that youth regularly use, providing digital contact information, and conducting outreach during times when youth are available—such as after work—can improve responsiveness and engagement.

Recruitment efforts should be designed around OSY schedules; recruiters should not expect youth to adapt to program schedules. Keep in mind that multiple contact attempts are often necessary, and no response usually signals competing demands rather than a lack of interest. Every outreach interaction presents an opportunity to expand networks and identify additional eligible youth. Recruiters can encourage youth and families to share information about the program with

friends, relatives, and peers while emphasizing that trained professionals must make eligibility determinations. The word-of-mouth referral process can significantly expand a program's reach within migrant communities.

Finally, successful recruiters and service providers proactively anticipate challenges before they become barriers. By identifying potential obstacles such as transportation limitations, work schedules, documentation concerns, or competing family responsibilities, professionals can develop solutions that increase participation.

Engagement and Service Delivery: Building Trust and Making Services Accessible

Identification and recruitment are only the beginning of meaningful work with OSY. Sustained engagement depends on building authentic relationships and delivering services that youth perceive as relevant, accessible, and responsive to their immediate realities and needs. Former OSY consistently emphasize that trust is the foundation of engagement. Youth are more likely to remain connected when professionals listen without judgment, demonstrate genuine care, maintain consistent communication, and follow through on commitments. Relationship-centered approaches that create safe, respectful, and welcoming environments help youth feel valued, understood, and more willing to participate over time.

Effective service delivery must also recognize that many OSY are navigating urgent survival needs when they first arrive in a community. Before youth can fully engage in educational or career-focused opportunities, they may need assistance accessing food, transportation, healthcare, housing supports, legal resources, employment assistance, or other essential services. Programs that provide strong community partnerships, practical support, and warm referrals can help stabilize immediate circumstances and reduce barriers that often prevent continued participation. A warm referral includes helping schedule the appointment,

confirming what documents are needed, and checking back afterward to ensure the connection was successful.

At the same time, programs play an important role in helping youth envision and pursue long-term opportunities. Empowering youth with information, guidance, and practical tools can increase confidence and help them make informed decisions about their futures. This includes clearly explaining educational pathways, workforce opportunities, English language learning programs, high school equivalency options, vocational training, and postsecondary opportunities. English language acquisition, in particular, remains a critical need for many OSY and is often directly connected to increased independence, educational persistence, and expanded employment opportunities. Consistently informing youth about available English learning opportunities, even when they initially appear uninterested, can create pathways to future engagement as trust and readiness develop over time.

Mental health and emotional well-being should also be viewed as essential components of service delivery. Many OSY experience stress, fatigue, isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty as they navigate migration experiences, demanding work schedules, family responsibilities, and educational goals. Programs that normalize conversations about well-being, provide encouragement, foster belonging, and connect youth to appropriate supports can strengthen resilience and persistence.

Staff do not need to be clinicians to be helpful; they can offer supportive listening, normalize seeking help, and connect youth to qualified providers. Equally important is maintaining a continuity of support when youth move between communities. Flexible service models, regular follow-up, cross-program collaboration, and ongoing communication can help youth remain connected to services and continue progressing toward their educational and career goals despite frequent mobility. When possible, collect several ways to reach youth, along with a trusted backup contact, to prevent losing touch during moves.

Continuous Improvement: Reducing Barriers and Strengthening Outcomes

Programs can strengthen outcomes for OSY by viewing outreach and service delivery as an ongoing process of reflection, learning, and continuous improvement. Effective improvement efforts begin with developing a clear understanding of the needs of local youth, community strengths, and existing service gaps. This includes identifying where OSY are located, understanding patterns of mobility and employment, assessing which outreach strategies are most effective, and determining areas in which additional partnerships or supports may be needed.

Continuous improvement also requires that programs regularly examine and refine their practices. Teams can strengthen engagement by evaluating outreach locations, recruitment timing, referral processes, communication methods, follow-up routines, and service delivery approaches. Gathering feedback directly from youth is especially important because their lived experiences provide valuable insight into what helps them stay engaged and what barriers continue to limit participation. Programs that actively listen to youth perspectives are better positioned to design services that feel relevant, accessible, and responsive to real-world needs.

To strengthen engagement and improve outcomes, programs may benefit from implementing the following practical, relationship-centered strategies:

- **Maintain a consistent presence** in trusted community spaces where youth naturally gather.
- **Develop strong partnerships** with employers, community organizations, and local service providers.
- **Establish reliable follow-up routines**, including multiple points of contact after initial outreach.

- **Create and maintain a comprehensive referral network** for education, workforce, health, and social services.
- **Offer flexible, low-barrier opportunities** that accommodate youth work schedules, transportation limitations, and family responsibilities.
- **Monitor engagement, service participation, referrals, and recontact rates** to identify opportunities, address barriers, and strengthen service delivery over time.

Most importantly, programs must **remain flexible and responsive to the evolving realities and needs** of OSY. When services are intentionally designed around youth circumstances, barriers to participation are reduced, trust is strengthened, and youth are more likely to remain engaged in opportunities that support their educational, personal, and career goals over time. Sustained engagement is a long-term effort that benefits from patience, persistence, and realistic expectations about pacing.

By meeting OSY where they are, addressing immediate needs, fostering authentic and trusting relationships, and maintaining a commitment to continuous improvement, MEP can create meaningful pathways that help OSY navigate challenges, build resilience, achieve educational goals, and pursue brighter futures for themselves, their families, and their communities. **When programs center dignity, relevance, and reliable follow-through, OSY are more likely to engage, stay connected, and achieve stronger outcomes.**

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