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# Supporting Student Re-Engagement: **A Qualitative Exploration of the First Year Implementation of Back to Our Future (B2OF)**



*A youth development coach works with a B2OF participant. Photo by Breakthrough.*

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# Executive Summary

## BACKGROUND

In August 2022, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) launched Back to Our Future (B2OF), a state-funded, district-led, evidence-informed effort to re-engage disconnected students at elevated risk for gun violence involvement.

The University of Chicago Crime Lab partnered with CPS throughout the pilot year of B2OF, which concluded in August 2023. In addition to analyzing the referral, consent, and participation data, the Crime Lab provided implementation support to UCAN, Youth Advocate Programs (YAP), Inc., and Breakthrough staff and conducted focus groups to understand how youth experienced the program.



*A B2OF participant works on credit recovery.  
Photo by Breakthrough.*

## OVERVIEW OF FOCUS GROUP ADMINISTRATION

To understand the first year of B2OF implementation, the Crime Lab conducted nine focus groups with 52 youth participants and 24 program staff in the summer of 2023.

The purpose of the focus groups was to include youth and staff voices in conversations about program successes and areas for improvement, and to provide context about youths' experiences in school and in B2OF. Focus group questions were developed following six months of individual meetings with each community-based organization (CBO) to explore program structure and engagement data. We previewed youth focus group questions with staff to ensure they were easy to understand and well-suited to young people in B2OF. These findings also rely on observations by members of the research team during site visits. See Appendix for a full list of focus group questions.

Each of the three CBOs administering the program participated in three focus groups – two for youth and one for staff – for a total of nine focus groups across the program.

- **Youth Participants.** Every young person in B2OF was eligible to participate in a focus group. We worked with B2OF staff who helped select a diverse group of individuals varying in age, gender, and length of program participation.
- **Staff participants.** Staff focus groups included at least one representative from each program area to best understand barriers and facilitators to program implementation.

In order to protect the privacy of youth and staff and to encourage honest responses, we did not record names of participants during the focus groups. As such, throughout the report, names preceding quotes have been changed. Focus group responses were typed up verbatim by a note-taker to ensure that youth and staff voices were accurately represented. We then coded transcripts and grouped findings into themes presented in this report.

This report offers a qualitative exploration of youth needs, experiences in B2OF, and facilitators and barriers to B2OF program implementation.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS



**Youth Engagement:** The initial 12-weeks of paid programming successfully attracts youth to B2OF, while ongoing engagement is supported by the strong relationships staff build with young people. Barriers to consistent program attendance include concerns about personal safety, caretaking responsibilities, and work schedule conflicts.



**Academic Programming:** Despite forming ambitious aspirations for the future, program participants struggle to make the connection between future goals and current educational opportunities, as seen in the low participation in online learning. This disconnect is exacerbated by a lack of motivation to complete lessons online and the fact that many participants are so far behind in school that the lessons are difficult to complete without support.



**Mental Health Programming:** Clinicians face challenges administering mental health programming in group settings due to the wide range of participants' needs and the stigma around therapy. In contrast, non-clinical program staff members have successfully bonded with youth, drawing on shared experiences to form relationships, becoming trusted figures with whom participants discuss personal issues.



**Staff Experiences:** The emotional burden of working with youth dealing with extensive trauma is compounded by a lack of institutional support for staff mental health, resulting in difficulties disengaging from work responsibilities during personal time.

## PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Enhance strategies to keep participants safe by expanding upon individual safety plans formed with young people and investing in participants' social support networks. Engaging and supporting family members and providing opportunities for participants to form friendships with one another may expand social support networks for young people inside and outside of programming. By removing barriers to program participation stemming from personal safety concerns, we may improve youth engagement in B2OF programming as well as future education and work opportunities.

2

Personalize mental health and academic programming to meet youth's individual needs. This could involve hiring a tutor to help participants with online learning, facilitating access to participants' transcripts and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for staff, and establishing formal points of connection to CPS high schools. Mental health programming could be bolstered by making one-on-one therapy available, training non-clinical staff to incorporate mental health skills into their mentoring of youth, and addressing topics that arose during focus groups, such as reproductive health and substance use, in a way that recognizes young peoples' context without pathologizing or shaming them for their choices.

3

Establish a comprehensive support system for staff, including resources like access to mental health professionals and stress management resources. Providing work cell phones could improve work-life balance. Offering organizational supports for mental health and wellbeing could be instrumental in maintaining staff morale and reducing burnout.

4

Incorporate civics education to foster self-efficacy and community building. Youth mention instances of racial discrimination in school and work settings. A civics education component covering topics such as community organizing, labor rights and voting may help them learn about their rights and feel equipped to stand up to the types of discrimination they mention during focus groups. This can also help young people think about ways they can access power and enact changes within their communities.

# Introduction

Back to Our Future (B2OF) is a state-funded, district-led, evidence-informed effort to re-engage disconnected students at an elevated risk for gun violence involvement.

In May 2022, Governor Pritzker and the City of Chicago Mayor's Office announced an \$11.5 million investment to support the B2OF pilot program, aiming to re-engage 1,000 disconnected young people with school and focusing on 500 youth during the first year. To implement B2OF, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) partners with three community-based organizations (CBOs): Breakthrough, UCAN, and Youth Advocate Programs (YAP), Inc.

The primary goal of B2OF is to provide eligible youth with intensive support to reduce the likelihood that they will be involved in gun violence and to re-engage youth with school.

Upon choosing to participate in B2OF, youth receive 12 months of programming that begins with a 12-week period of paid, intensive services in the following five program areas:

- 1 Soft skills training
- 2 Community building
- 3 Mental health interventions, including trauma-informed cognitive behavioral interventions (CBI)
- 4 Mentorship and family support
- 5 Academic re-entry support

During the 12-week program intensive, youth are expected to create a plan to return to an education program that best meets their post-secondary goals and individualized needs. Education pathways include enrolling in a CPS traditional high school, enrolling in a CPS Options school, or enrolling in a General Educational Development (GED) program through Chicago City Colleges.

To understand youth experiences in B2OF, the University of Chicago Crime Lab conducted nine focus groups, speaking with 52 youth and 24 staff from each of the three CBOs administering B2OF. Focus group questions were developed after six months of meeting with staff at each of the three CBOs (see Appendix for a list of questions).

Staff in each CBO were asked to recruit a diverse group of youth varying in age, gender, and length of program participation for the focus groups. To protect the privacy of youth, we did not collect names or detailed information on focus group participants. As such, we cannot speak to the exact breakdown of their backgrounds, though note that youth focus group participants may include: 1) former B2OF participants who did not complete the program, 2) current program participants, or 3) young people who completed all B2OF coursework. Youth participants were given a \$25 Visa gift card for participating. Focus groups with staff members in each CBO included a representative from each of the five B2OF program areas.

Focus group responses were transcribed verbatim and systematically coded to identify key themes that reflect the participants' experiences and viewpoints. This qualitative coding entailed an iterative process of initial and focused coding, during which emerging patterns were refined and categorized. We coded responses to specific questions as well as for topics that came up throughout focus group conversations. We consistently reviewed emerging themes in analytic memos to ensure that key findings were grounded in the data and representative of the collective narrative. In this report, we highlight these themes and reinforce them with carefully selected participant quotes that provide illustrative examples of student experiences. To safeguard participant confidentiality, pseudonyms replace real names throughout.

This report begins by detailing pre-B2OF school experiences of youth participants. It then outlines their engagement with B2OF, focusing on their reasons for joining and their understanding of the program. We then examine the execution of the program, including key program successes and challenges within each program area. The report concludes with a synthesis of key findings and proposes recommendations for program continuous improvement.

# I. Young Peoples' School and Work Experiences

During the focus groups, youth were asked about their lives outside of B2OF, including their most recent experiences in school and work. Understanding the contextual factors that influence a young person's decision to join and remain in B2OF is crucial for tailoring the program to meet participants' needs more effectively. In this section, we delve into young peoples' often challenging school experiences and reasons for disengagement. We explore the mixed range of perspectives on the prospect of returning to education and emphasize the value that employment holds for many of the participants.

## STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES AT SCHOOL

During the analysis of focus group data, it was evident that when asked an open-ended question about school experiences prior to involvement in B2OF, discussions centered almost completely on negative perceptions and experiences at school. The language used by several participants across focus groups helps to highlight a general level of dissatisfaction with their educational environments, using terms like 'terrible' and 'hell.'

One of the recurring concerns noted by young people was their physical safety at school, with several young people recounting specific interpersonal conflicts they had experienced with either staff or peers in the past.

**One focus group participant, Maurice, described the risk he felt walking down the hallway at school:**

“

School is like a block now. [Other participants say 'Yeah!' simultaneously]. People see school like a block now. Walking on a hallway feels like walking on a normal street, when you go on the other side of the corridor you gotta watch out. They asked me what I'm doing on their side of the hallway and I'm like 'Uh I have a class right there...'

He described a constant need for caution, which was echoed by Nathan, who explained, "My school be tweakin. The people, you don't do nothing, [and there are] people with guns." Jeremy described leaving school following a series of conflicts, explaining, "I was getting in fights and stuff. I didn't wanna go back after I got jumped." While schools do implement security measures to improve student safety, that in turn can lead to the sentiment that there are too many rules, as one participant explained: "School is a jail, no phone, you gotta take shoes off... only one person in the bathroom." While many of the focus group conversations about negative school experiences focused on physical safety concerns, three focus group participants mentioned encountering racism from school staff and fellow students.

While students primarily brought up negative school experiences during the focus groups, one appealing aspect of school that several students noted was the opportunity to interact with other students. In particular, attending school provides an opportunity for young people to engage with romantic interests. The social aspects of school attendance led some students to feel a sense of community within the educational setting.

## REASONS FOR LEAVING SCHOOL

The top reasons students mentioned for leaving school included their concerns for physical safety and wanting to avoid interpersonal conflicts with other students or staff that are outlined above. In addition, another key reason for leaving school that was mentioned centered around family commitments and childcare responsibilities.

**The conversation below between the focus group facilitator and Kayla demonstrates the pull of caretaking responsibilities that some students face:**

“

**Facilitator:** Why did you choose to, or have to, stop going to school?

**Kayla:** My momma had a stroke and I had to take care of my two brothers.

[...]

**Facilitator:** Did anyone help you make that decision?

**Kayla:** I just had to. My momma come first. I get my diploma on my time, but my momma come first and my brothers. I gotta take care of them.

Another young woman, Jada, described having to leave school when she had her baby. In addition to leaving due to safety concerns or family commitments, a few young people mentioned having to leave school when they were incarcerated. A few more reported falling so far behind during COVID-19 that “there was no point in going back.”

During focus groups with staff, several staff members noted the disconnect that students often have between school attendance and future earnings, which can influence their decision to leave school. One staff member explained, “[Youth] don’t understand that this stuff is not disconnected, with school, and making money, they don’t understand that things are interconnected, but that’s because of trauma and being in survival mode.” The staff member went on to explain, “Some of them say they were failed because of their teachers and principals,” highlighting the role that school staff can play in engaging students. When describing why some of the young people who participate in B2OF left school, a staff member emphasized that “9 out of 10 are here for non-academic reasons.”

## MIXED PERSPECTIVES ABOUT RETURNING TO SCHOOL

When asked about whether they wanted to return to school, 42% of the youth in the focus groups who responded said they did. During conversations about reasons for leaving school, several youth organically brought up that they did wish to get a high school degree, including Kayla and Jada, who both left because of caretaking responsibilities. Caleb, who left because he perceived it was the cool thing to do, described that decision with regret, explaining, “That was dumb, and I do wanna go back to school.”

The facilitator asked those who reported wanting to return to school why they wanted to go back, and responses centered around wanting to feel a personal sense of accomplishment, making family members proud, and preparing for future careers.

Jamal explained, “I want to do it for my momma,” and Jayden similarly noted, “To make my parents proud.” While staff members brought up that youth do not always consider the connection between school attendance and future earnings, several youth noted they wanted to go back for future job prospects, such as Aaliyah, who said, “I need my diploma to get out of school and get a job,” or Brianna, who said, “To go to trade school.”

While just under half of focus group respondents wanted to return to school, several participants brought up specific conditions that would be necessary for them to successfully return, with one saying that “everything” would need to change for them to decide to go back.

When thinking about the format of school, several participants mentioned that they would “rather do it on the computer,” but others pushed back, saying “online was awful,” suggesting the importance of tailoring to specific student needs and preferences.

A common theme was that young people would need support to return to school successfully. In line with the reasons young people listed for leaving school in the first place, staff brought up safety as the main issue young people face when trying to return to school, with one staff member explaining, “Many of them have valid reasons not to go to school,” going on to say, “If we work with them on safety first, they can reach their goal.”

**A young person, John, seemed to have a similar take on safety risks involved with returning, explaining:**

“

It’s gonna be the same stuff. You’re gonna go to a new school, [and] it’s gonna be a couple of months, a week... Not even a week. Two days. It’s gonna be good for two days before somebody is gonna start at you and it will start again.

In one focus group, participants engaged in a nuanced debate about the conditions that would allow them to feel safe returning to school. The discussion did not yield a consensus; while some believed that safety could be enhanced by finding a crew, others countered this view, highlighting the complications that group affiliations could lead to. One participant explained, “Once you get into the clique, that’s when problems start.”



*B2OF participants engage in programming. Photo by Breakthrough.*

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT

When asked about their work history, including jobs, personal businesses, or other income sources, 65% of the 52 focus group participants affirmed having work experience. It should be noted that some may have included the first 12 weeks of paid participation in the B2OF program as paid work experience. The types of jobs participants held varied, encompassing jobs like hairdressing and nail services, construction labor, and retail positions. In describing work values, there was an emphasis on the benefits of working more than 20 hours per week and receiving weekly paychecks.

While almost two-thirds of participants had some form of prior employment experience, some noted difficulties associated with securing and keeping a job. Youth expressed an awareness of discrimination they may face in the workplace and of systematic barriers that can impede employment.

In one focus group, the topic came up organically after the facilitator asked participants what they would tell the mayor to do to help young people in the city, with Brian jumping in to say, “Everybody [should] get jobs, even if you have a felony,” while several in the room exclaimed “Yes,” and others nodded along in agreement. These reactions to Brian’s statement illustrate a recognition among participants of systematic obstacles to employment, in this case the stigmatization and consequences of having a criminal record, which can limit job opportunities. Another focus group participant, Isaiah, noted, “You have to cover all of your tattoos, no color hair, you can’t wear it too long, a whole bunch of other stuff. You can’t have tattoos, and I have tattoos everywhere.” Isaiah’s mention of restrictions around a tattoos and hairstyles, illustrates an awareness of the potential for discrimination based on personal appearance.



# II. Student Experiences During the First Year

During the focus groups, participants were prompted to share their experiences with the B2OF program. In this section, we explore motivations behind their initial involvement in B2OF, the factors that encourage their continued participation, and the obstacles that deter their engagement with the program. We also highlight participants' confusion about the overarching objectives of B2OF, despite their work to set ambitious personal goals in collaboration with program staff. Finally, we cover the lack of support available to program staff.

## INITIAL INCENTIVES TO PARTICIPATE IN B2OF

When asked about their motivations for initially agreeing to join B2OF, money was the most commonly discussed reason for deciding to participate at the outset. When describing why he chose to join B2OF, Zachary said, "I heard about the money, and I said yeah." In another of the focus groups, a student responded to the question of *what were the top 2 reasons for deciding to participate in B2OF?* by explaining, "Money, money. That's really it." Another student in the same focus group responded to the question of how they first heard about B2OF by explaining while laughing, "I asked my friend [referring to another member of the focus group sitting next to her] where she was getting the \$80 checks from." During focus groups with staff, they similarly highlighted the initial 12 weeks of pay as a big draw for young people. In one focus group, two staff members even role-played the type of conversation they would typically have with young people when trying to convince them to join B2OF, highlighting the focus youth often have on the paycheck incentive.

Other commonly mentioned reasons for participation include the desire to finish high school or to positively impact parole outcomes or ongoing court cases.

**A staff member noted that sometimes young people who have experienced traumatic events are even more motivated to make changes in their lives for their own benefit, explaining:**

“

What I have seen, some of the most receptive students are the ones who dealt with being locked up. They get to the breaking point, when they say, 'I don't want to do this anymore.' [...] Students who are charged with a crime ask, 'What can I do?' We have one student who lost a couple of siblings. We thought he wasn't receptive, but now he has three jobs, [and] he asks, 'How do I get a car?' Or, 'How do I get a driver's license?'

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH STAFF KEEP YOUNG PEOPLE COMING BACK

When asked about why they keep coming back to B2OF, the first thing that almost every young person mentioned is their positive relationships with program staff, using language to describe staff like "cool as hell," and "big sister slash momma vibes."

Staff are aware of the importance of forming strong relationships based on trust and mutual respect with young people and using shared experience to model new ways of relating to others. Several focus group participants brought up relationships with B2OF staff when listing their support system.

**When the group was asked by the facilitator whether there was someone in their life they could call when they needed help, Michelle jumped in, saying:**

“

Of course! When I started at [new job], I didn't have a babysitter, and [B2OF staff member] let me drop my baby off to her. I work at night, so I left my baby at 8pm. She stayed at her house, and [B2OF staff member] got her ready to go to school in the morning.

Among staff focus group participants, there was also a consensus that positive relationships between youth and staff were what motivated continued engagement. A youth participant described program staff as “basically like family now.”

Staff are aware of the importance of forming strong relationships with young people based on trust and mutual respect and use shared experiences as a way of connecting.

**As one staff member explained:**

“

Incentives are great, but that's not for the long run. That long-term part is structure for growth. The caveat is that advocates and directors are people from some of the same walks of life, we're not just sitting in the office and saying, 'This is what it is,' from some of these situations. But once youth dig into that and they see, that's what keeps them here.

Another staff member noted that students often aren't used to getting such a caring response from adults, explaining, “I had kids saying, ‘Nobody's ever talked to me like this.’ And I'm like, ‘This is a normal conversation to me!’” In another focus group, a staff member similarly noted, “A lot of these youth don't have anybody there with them, so when they engage with the [staff], it's a different world for them.” Youth are often around adults who view and label them negatively, whereas staff members in B2OF approach youth with more understanding.

**One staff member explained this approach:**

“

That dynamic is different for them. In school, if you blow up to the teacher, you can't get back in there. But they came back here, and we say, ‘We still love you.’ This demographic is sensitive, our approach will be gentle and restorative.

Here, the staff member uses this example to show how B2OF staff members adopt a more restorative approach with young people, contrasting that to what the staff member notes students will experience in the school setting.

In addition to connection and relationships, young people mentioned that the program provides them with direction as well as access to resources, job opportunities, and financial compensation. Youth also felt that the program was a truly safe space, physically and emotionally. Specific aspects of the program setup, including having building security at some sites, helped youth feel safe and comfortable while engaging in programming. This is important, because many conversations throughout the focus groups centered on other areas in their lives where youth do not feel safe.

## ○ BARRIERS TO B2OF ENGAGEMENT

While receiving financial compensation and forming valuable connections with staff are strong motivations for young people to join and remain committed to B2OF, in the thematic analysis, several challenges were identified that disrupt consistent program attendance. One of the most consistently mentioned reasons for not attending B2OF programming is a fear about personal safety when leaving the home, even though several young people identified the B2OF space itself as safe. When a facilitator asked one of the focus groups how they felt about taking public transportation, Jordan replied, “It’s a fishbowl activity [...] You’re throwing everything into the fishbowl and you never know who you’re going to run into,” while others in the group nodded along and replied “Yes,” in agreement.

**Another student, Ashley, described the reason behind her fear of public safety:**

“

I got shot before. We both were [gestures to her friend sitting next to her], so I don’t like public transportation [...] I got out of my trauma, but we did it together. [B2OF staff member] gave us an assignment to get on a bus and take a picture of what we’re doing, and feel outside, because I can’t even walk outside my gate and walk down the street because I feel like something may happen. Once on a bus I felt like something is gonna happen and [B2OF staff member] stayed on the phone the whole time, and that helped a lot.

In this case, Ashley described how a B2OF staff member helped her work through her fear of taking public transportation. A staff member also noted the difficulty in ensuring safety, highlighting that it is difficult to reach young people who are not able to leave their home, explaining, “For the ones who are really in the streets, it’s hard for them to move around, it’s a risk for them. It’s hard to give them a resource if they can only stay at home.” Youth noted safety as a barrier despite program staff offering bus cards, Ubers, and rides for young people to come to programming.

Others listed caretaking responsibilities as a barrier to program attendance. When asked about the reason for not showing up to B2OF some days, Michael responded to the question, explaining, “I’ve got little sisters and brothers I gotta watch from time to time. My nieces and nephews too.” Jasmine agreed, saying, “I got kids.” Similar to caretaking responsibilities being a barrier to school attendance, it also is sometimes a barrier to program attendance, particularly for those who are caring for young children not yet eligible for daycare.

Another challenge to program attendance that youth highlighted is scheduling conflicts between work and program participation. As highlighted in an above section, youth care about their employment opportunities, so disruptions to that may affect program attendance. While youth are paid during the first 12 weeks of B2OF, pay frequency varied by CBO and time in the program. Several youth noted the importance of being paid weekly. A few youth participants also mentioned that they needed to be able to work more than 20 hours per week outside the program, which was difficult to do given B2OF’s 20-hour-a-week program target.

While the key themes centered around challenges to program attendance, one potential challenge to program participation, even among youth who show up to programming, is a difficulty fully engaging due to being tired. While observing two mental health programming sessions at different CBOs, a research team member noted a young person in each session put their head down and fell asleep. In each instance, staff gently woke the young person up, and checked to see if they needed anything, before encouraging them to stay awake and participate in programming. During the focus groups, staff also noted other health concerns they had about youth that could be affecting the quality of their participation. For example, a few staff members mentioned that young people sometimes show up to programming high. Youth in focus groups talked about substance use, particularly smoking marijuana, as a coping mechanism to handling stressful situations.

## CUSTOMIZING THE GOALS OF B2OF TO THE INDIVIDUAL

While students generally reported positive experiences interacting with program staff and using program resources, there was a lack of awareness among some students that they were even part of a program within their CBO called “Back to Our Future.” In two of the focus groups with students, when they were asked how long they’d been part of Back to Our Future, there was silence. When the focus group leader followed up to ask students in each focus group whether they knew what “B2OF” or “Back to Our Future” was, students responded with silence or non-affirming responses like “nah” or “no.” For these participants, they instead understood their participation as part of the broader programming offered to them by the CBO they attended.

Despite some confusion about the B2OF program itself, students were able to clearly articulate a range of personal objectives related to their attendance of programming at the CBO itself. When students in each focus group were asked about how they describe the program they are participating in to other people, responses varied from participant to participant, including, “I come to school here,” “work,” “getting talked to [referring to therapy and mentorship],” “staying out of trouble,” “working on myself,” and “finishing my high school,” reflecting the way that youth within the program have individual goals that they were working toward.

## YOUNG PEOPLE SET CLEAR AND AMBITIOUS PERSONAL GOALS

While youth participants were not always clear on the specific B2OF goals, they did work to set personal goals for the future, which were often ambitious. When asked about their future goals and where they see themselves in 5 years, young people were excited to talk about their futures, listing anything from educational goals to entrepreneurial career goals to more general life goals. Some of the career-oriented goals mentioned by young people include:

- Trade school
- Trucking Business Owner
- College graduate
- Nurse
- Cosmetologist
- Music Manager
- Mechanic
- Lawyer
- Anesthesiologist
- Real Estate Agent
- Hair Salon Owner

Others mentioned more general life goals, like owning their own car or their own house or “going to Mexico to live on the beach.” While youth were setting clear and ambitious goals for the future, there were mixed feelings about returning to school, as highlighted above. When asked if they thought B2OF was helping them to achieve their goals, almost every young person said yes, with only a few expressing uncertainty. Notably, nobody negated the program’s impact.

Andre attributed his positive view to the program’s practical assistance, citing an example: “They had someone come talk about CDL [Commercial Driver’s License].” Maya agreed with Andre, appreciating the program for enhancing her “social skills and CV.”



*CPS Chief of Safety and Security Jadine Chou speaks at a B2OF event.*

# III. Staff Experiences During the First Year

During the staff focus groups, they were primarily asked about their perceptions of young people’s experiences in B2OF rather than about their own general experiences administering B2OF. However, staff were asked to talk about the aspects of B2OF that made them proud, and to describe the supports that were available to them as staff members, and additional resources that they would find helpful.

## ASPECTS OF B2OF THAT MAKE STAFF PROUD

Throughout the focus groups with staff, a key theme that emerged was a sense of pride over the positive relationships staff had built with students. As described in the previous section, staff members go out of their way to bond with participants and have a strong dedication to their wellbeing and development. When staff in each focus group were asked the open-ended question about what part of B2OF they were most proud of, the most common answer was being able to see young people start to succeed at making progress toward their goals. One staff member described pride at the moment when she observes when young people “start to get it.” These type of “success stories,” as one staff member called it, could include anything from graduating high school to starting to apply for jobs to actual securing full-time work.

## CHALLENGES TO SUPPORTING STAFF

Staff members, deeply committed to the wellbeing of the young people they work with, consistently raised concerns about inadequate support mechanisms in place to protect their own wellbeing. They often draw on personal experiences to connect with youth, but this level of emotional engagement can resurface painful memories for staff. One poignant example is a staff member who, after losing her own son to violence, relies on empathy from that experience to make connections with youth, believing, “What comes from the heart reaches the heart.”

When discussing the available support systems, staff typically identified drawing on their colleagues as informal emotional supports.



*Students at a B2OF event.*

Formal support structures were not frequently mentioned. In one focus group, there were several seconds of silence after staff were asked about the supports in place to help them deal with secondhand trauma and prevent burnout until it was broken when one staff member laughed. In another focus group, it was notable that when a participant mentioned that staff at their organization have personal access to clinicians, none of the other focus group staff in the room had been aware of this.

As one staff member emphasized:

“

I think we do support each other, but we could do better to support the mental health of each other [...] There should be something in place for us, and that hasn't happened. With the growth of everything, we do have to sit down and talk about it [...] It's like, if you don't have strong staff, it's like teaching the wrong things. We're pushing kids for kids to take mental health and take care of wellness, but we're not doing it.

The challenge of disengaging from work to attend to personal wellbeing was another common theme. At one CBO, the absence of separate work and personal phones made it difficult for staff to disconnect, even during their vacation time. One staff member explained that when young people message them “all the time,” “it's hard not to respond.” Another staff member agreed, saying they had only “56 vacation hours to go away,” and that they still felt compelled to respond to messages from young people during that time. Throughout the youth focus groups, several young people mention reaching out and receiving support from program staff even outside of typical program hours.



*A student speaks at a B2OF event.*

# IV. The Implementation of Each Program Area

This section outlines specific barriers and facilitators to the implementation of each of the five program areas of B2OF: (1) **academics**, (2) **mental health**, (3) **mentorship and family advocacy**, (4) **community building**, and (5) **soft skills**. We asked about each component during staff focus groups and incorporated feedback from youth about their experiences participating in each part of programming.

## ACADEMICS

The academic programming in B2OF consists of an online learning platform, which is aimed at supporting students in becoming reacclimated within an academic setting. As part of this reacclimating process, staff assist young people in completing courses online using the Edmentum platform. When youth in the focus groups were asked about their experience with online learning, only 44% of the 52 participants said they had used Edmentum or another online learning platform. When talking about online learning, in addition to Edmentum, young people also mentioned engaging in online learning related to credit recovery, GED courses, and another platform called Edgenuity.



### Facilitators

In the focus groups, youth largely reported either liking online learning, or at least having neutral feelings about it, which is interesting given that fewer than half reported using the online platform. There was little discussion about openly disliking or being against online learning. The most common takeaway about online learning is that young people feel it allows them necessary flexibility. Participants noted that Edmentum allows them to engage in school “on their own time,” which also allows youth to be in school and employed at the same time. Staff similarly noted that the flexibility that online learning offers benefits young people with chronic attendance issues or those who have outside work responsibilities. Students found it convenient that they could use Edmentum on their phones from “anywhere.”

Students who struggle more with the traditional school format also liked Edmentum for the ease it provided.

Youth who suffer from anxiety in the traditional school setting noted that online learning is better for them, with one explaining that it is easier because they, “don’t like being around a lot of people.” Xavier, a focus group participant, explained, “I like it more from school. Ain’t nobody be telling me what to do. I’m not distracted.”



### Barriers

Because fewer than half of focus group respondents reported using online learning through the B2OF programming, it is important to understand barriers to implementation of the academic programming. Staff and youth noted several barriers to engaging in online learning.

One of the most frequently mentioned barriers to using an online learning platform is the difficulty of finding a distraction-free environment to focus on learning. While many students mentioned liking online learning, a few mentioned that it is difficult to focus on the computer for long periods of time. Alexis explained, “I hate it, because I have ADHD and other stuff, so when I sit by the computer, I get distracted, [...] they [staff] just throw us on the computer,” highlighting the lack of hands-on engagement accompanying online learning. Another student similarly brought up the missing social aspect of online learning, arguing that she preferred traditional school for that reason. In a section above, we highlighted that some students are motivated to attend school because of the social benefits provided, which do not translate to the online setting.

Another barrier identified by staff was that some B2OF participants have been disconnected from school for so long that they are very far behind, making it difficult to engage in the online lessons provided. A staff member explained that some youth “are so far behind academically that [...] some of them can’t read, can barely write, spell. So, these things can be huge barriers.” Some students in this situation face a lot of anxiety about schoolwork. A distinct but related issue is the difficulty of accessing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or transcripts for students through the program. One staff member explained that there should be more education for parents about IEPs so that young people are able to thrive academically.

While many students noted positive opinions about online learning, staff mentioned having larger concerns with the shift to online learning. There was some discussion about the developmental impact of doing classes on a computer rather than in a traditional school setting where students could interact with others.

**One explained:**



I wanna do what’s best for kids and the community, and that is not them educating themselves in a room alone in front of the computer. We should continue with allowing them to develop appropriately in a traditional setting, which is appropriate for a majority of them.

Others question how much young people are actually learning on the platform. A few staff noted they felt it would be better for students to work with professional teachers in the classroom settings, rather than volunteers or tutors provided through Edmentum.

A few students also mentioned an Edmentum-specific barrier, which is that it was difficult and slow to get a new class loaded on the Edmentum platform after completing the previous course. This could lead students to stop engaging in online learning in the moment instead of continuing on to the next lesson.

## MENTAL HEALTH

B2OF relies on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and clinical support designed to address trauma, anxiety, and depression among participants. The mental health sessions were structured somewhat differently across each CBO, with some focusing on small group sessions divided by gender and others having larger discussion-style sessions to learn about topics like the physiological responses to stress. Two of the sites also offer music and art therapy to engage students.

Several students participating in the focus groups identified the mental health sessions as their favorite part of programming. Staff also highlighted the importance of the mental health programming. A staff member explained, “Trauma is the main thing kids are going through. That’s their biggest barrier to success. Once we get past that trauma, everything else will fall in line,” highlighting the importance of this program area.



### Facilitators

During focus group conversations, staff mentioned working directly with clinicians to help youth identify their needs, reconnect to their future self, and to make therapy more relatable. Staff highlighted this as an effective part of programming, with one explaining that the therapists can help people identify their “goal before all the trauma happened” and to teach them how to identify “what they need help with.” Throughout focus groups, both staff and youth brought up that it is often difficult for young people to identify and vocalize their needs.

While several of the youth expressed skepticism about sharing their feelings or struggles with others, a few reported feeling more open to therapy after being exposed to it in B2OF, even after initially being resistant. One young person talked about this, saying they used to “hate therapy, but [the B2OF therapist] made me like it,” because they were so “cool about it” and kept it “real.” The theme around B2OF staff being able to meet kids where they are at and connect with them in a way that feels authentic to participants carries over into the mental health programming.



**A mental health programming staff member explains:**



In clinical, I want them to tell their story, decipher what happened. What decisions did you all make? Would you change it? Creating a safe space. Many of the students do not feel comfortable sharing, 'I brought a gun to school.' And also by allowing them to speak freely. You can cuss, so that they can express what they want to express.

Similar to more general conversations about the larger programming, the mental health programming staff describe a particular focus on creating a safe space where youth can express themselves. The focus is on recognizing the assets that youth have and taking into account their background without pathologizing or shaming them for their reactions to difficult situations. Another staff member noted, "I sell it as an open conversation about things youth may be coping with, not lying on the couch type of therapy, because they run from the word 'therapy.'" One young person, Alex, talked about how he felt like the mental health programming had affected him, saying, "Since I've been in this program, I have been more chill. My anger has been more chill. I used to get mad when somebody's looking at me too long." Others noted that they like therapy, feeling like it teaches them practical "life lessons," and can help them "become a better person."



**Barriers**

The key barrier that came up in discussions about mental health programming is the challenge clinicians face to taking an individualized approach while operating in a group setting. Many youth participants have faced and are currently dealing with extremely traumatic situations. It can be difficult to meet diverse needs while working with a larger group of participants.

Staff and youth also highlighted privacy concerns with the group therapy sessions. Clinicians described the difficulty in trying to create a safe and non-judgmental environment. They notice that some young people have concerns about who else is present in the classroom. Some of the CBOs don't have a "private room" for holding therapy sessions, furthering these concerns. This also speaks to larger challenges staff face with getting students to feel comfortable opening up in a group setting.

There is often a negative stigma surrounding discussions of mental health, and many participants have the mentality of, "I fight. I am not weak."

**One staff member talks about this challenge:**



Stigma. They don't know how to deal with grief. They don't know how to deal with a loss of loved ones. They have friends dying on a regular basis, and they coped with it for so long in their own ways. It's a norm for them. It's unusual, and unfortunately, everyone takes it differently. Some go back to drugs, some people go back to drinking. Some hurt other people. So, just finding ways and more resources to give back to youth, to get their minds off their everyday lives.

While some young people are eventually open to the idea of therapy, it can be difficult to adopt new coping mechanisms that involve emotional vulnerability when they have other coping mechanisms they are used to relying on. Young people also noted challenges to applying lessons they learn in therapy outside of B2OF. One youth participant, Elijah, said that he found the content he was learning to be "useful, but you can't use it in some sense" because people outside of the program "are gonna look at you like you're a goofy;" others nodded in agreement. In one focus group, the conversation turned to the length of time spent on mental health programming, with several young people noting that they don't like the sessions being so long, specifically mentioning the 2-hour therapy sessions.

Another challenge staff face when engaging youth in mental health programming is the influence of those outside the program. When there is instability in a young person's home environment, that can sometimes hinder the progress they are making in therapy. One staff member explained, "[Parents] can undo all the work that you've done. If you retrigger a trauma, like when they go home, and it's just like click. We had this kid, his mom was an alcoholic, and we lost him." This highlights the importance of strengthening support systems for young people outside of B2OF.

## MENTORSHIP AND FAMILY ADVOCACY

Mentorship and family advocacy plays a key role in building trust with young people and their families. The mentorship component usually involves one-on-one and small group mentorship sessions with staff. The program also offers family support through direct social services connection.



### Facilitators

Staff members highlighted the importance of solidifying relationships between youth and other programs beyond B2OF to provide wrap-around lasting support for young people and their families. Each of the three CBOs participating in B2OF refer youth to services or bring in additional resources, when needed. There are two key components of the program that are especially helpful for this advocacy work.

First, by administering intake assessments at the beginning of the program, staff are able to assess young peoples' needs and identify areas for support, which are often difficult to identify organically since young people do not always want to talk about their needs. A staff member explained that "During those initial meetings of intake," staff are "customizing services we have to offer and showing them that we have an ongoing wraparound support so that they know where to come for anything that I can't offer."

Second, each of the three CBOs is able to leverage existing partnerships or draw on their CBO's larger resources to help youth get the support they need. One staff member listed the names of specific external organizations they knew about that could be drawn on to provide youth with additional resources. Another talked about relying on resources from the larger CBO, outside of the B2OF programming, to provide young people with support, explaining, "We offer other resources offered by [my CBO] when they don't have food at home or when the lights are out. We offer resources that help the family."

When it comes to the mentorship component of programming, as noted throughout this report, youth consistently mentioned trusting and liking program staff. Many mentioned calling them for help or advice despite typically being resistant to sharing life problems with others. Again, staff note here the importance of forming genuine connections with youth.

**A staff member described the ways they work to form bonds with participants:**



When it comes to mentoring, the relationship piece is important. We have boys do the basketball tournament for their mentoring piece, and take the girls upstairs, which leads to conversations about many different things [...] It's an array of things [we discuss]. We've talked about relationships, kids, issues with their baby's father, education. Topics go everywhere.



### Barriers

Some of the obstacles here, particularly around family advocacy work, relate to a difficulty in identifying needs. While the initial intake assessments help staff assess young peoples' needs, it is less clear how family needs are being assessed and addressed, despite the many barriers to school and program attendance that youth highlighted that directly stem from family obligations.

**A staff member detailed the difficulty of identifying family-related needs:**



Many of them do not know how to ask for help. We work closer with participants versus the families, so students who have children or take care of siblings, sometimes I have to tell them every little thing, what's available. 'Tell me what you need.' [And they say,] 'I don't really know what to ask you for.' [And I say,] 'I tell you who to connect you with and we go from there.'

However, even when family needs are identified, there are sometimes still challenges related to the family advocacy work.

One staff member explained, “When the family is kinda complacent, change would be a disruption to their lives,” pointing out that family members have to be on board with getting help for it to be successful.

However, engaging the family is an important component of programming because staff members and young people noted that parents sometimes try to stop youth from receiving services out of fear that it could affect the benefits the family receives from other programs.

Several staff noted youth resistance to asking for help when they need it as a challenge to the mentorship side of programming.

**A staff member described what this sometimes looks like:**

“When the situation is deeper than mentoring, when they are so deep that they can’t take advice, they just say, ‘I can’t do that.’ And I’m like, ‘Just try.’ But, it’s like life. The problem is stability and doing stuff they’re not supposed to be doing.

This is in line with findings from the mental health staff, who suggested that youth are not always accustomed to talking about their feelings and that there is a tendency to rely on coping mechanisms that they are used to, which may no longer serve them.

## COMMUNITY BUILDING

Programming around community building is tailored to meet specific youth and community needs at each of the three program sites. Activities included in the programming include sports, volunteering, and resource fairs, all designed to bring young people and the surrounding community together.

### Facilitators

The CBOs effectively leverage partnerships with local organizations, including churches, food pantries, and others, to get youth more involved in helping their communities. Staff believed this fosters a sense of belonging for program participants, an area that several youths have mentioned they had been lacking in their lives outside of the program.

One staff member mentioned that they have young people go out and distribute food from food pantries to the community, saying, “Kids love that.” Several CBOs worked to identify areas of interest to youth and opened their sports facilities to bring kids together in a fun way, on the basketball court.

**Another staff member described volunteer work their CBO organizes for youth:**

“We partner with senior communities. We will do different jobs. Paint decks. Just to take them to the community, and [give them something] to be proud of. They talk to these seniors about their experiences. It could be fixing flowerbeds or cutting grass. One of these ladies was an aerospace engineer in NASA. She is an African American lady who could easily be one of these youth! This is what comes with community outreach, helping the community, and being part of it.



### Barriers

The clearest barrier to engaging in community building is concerns about safety and violence among youth participants. Three staff members described different tactics they try to take to ease young peoples’ concerns related to community building events, explaining:

- **Staff 1:** Safety, the fear of safety. It’s just their mind. It’s more their projection, their fear...
- **Staff 2:** Even if we say we provide safety, like there is security or police they don’t see it as a safety thing.
- **Staff 3:** Some of them feel like they can’t be guarded. No one can provide safety to them. We had a student who was murdered – not here – and he feared for his life every day.

Further, while staff members regularly take youth to different areas of Chicago to show them there is “more to the world” than the “4 to 5 blocks they are used to,” it can be challenging for youth to explore new spaces.

## SOFT SKILLS

Each of the three CBOs offer training in soft skills, though the specific focus varies. Offerings include resume workshops, job interview training, financial literacy education, and learning about how to ask for help, among other topics.



### Facilitators

Program staff highlighted the existing connections with outside organizations as critical to helping youth gain soft skills related to finding jobs, going to college, and attending vocational programs. Existing connections with the City Colleges of Chicago, the military, and other organizations help staff develop soft skill training sessions. One staff member noted, “We did a phenomenal job with opportunities they never thought about. We had a guy who came to talk about trades – most of them do not know what trades are,” describing ways that they can leverage outside connections to teach youth about new opportunities.

Staff also worked to encourage participation in programming around developing soft skills by holding in-person and virtual training sessions, which make it so that youth who live further away, those who have safety concerns, or those with caretaking responsibilities can participate more easily. They also worked to ensure that lessons are relevant to the needs of the youth they are working with.

### Youth discussed aspects of programming around soft skills that they found most helpful:



**Danielle:** [Staff] told me how to use my money.

[Others agreed that financial literacy lessons had been useful.]

**Danielle:** I like to be financially independent too.

**Jermaine:** You learn how to code switch. People in the office may take stuff too personal. You gotta hold your tongue most times, and here you learn how to manage things.



### Barriers

Staff noticed that the soft skills programming is an area that young people are often less interested in. This may be partially because they are unfamiliar with the content, as many seem receptive to the lessons once they understand how it can apply to their everyday lives. When it comes to working with youth on job preparation and placements, the main challenge staff mentioned is that young people do not always show up to jobs on time, which can result in their getting fired. This can also lead to larger issues by hurting the CBO’s credibility and relationship with local employers, which could otherwise continue to provide more opportunities for other youth participants. Staff also note participants’ criminal backgrounds and “lack of movement” as a barrier to connecting them with employment opportunities.

# v. Findings

This report offers insights from the first year of three CBOs in Chicago implementing B2OF, focusing on the experiences of the youth involved. This section outlines key takeaways from focus groups with program participants and staff and presents a series of recommendations aimed at enhancing the B2OF program's services and delivery. While the focus groups reflect a non-representative subset of the B2OF participant population, these results provide valuable insights into the first year of B2OF programming.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Youth Engagement

In the [B2OF year-end report](#), we found that roughly 1 in 5 referred youth consented to participate in the B2OF program. Here, we showed that among the focus group participants, the 12-week paid component of B2OF was a key incentive for enrollment. Sustained engagement post-payment was primarily attributed to the meaningful relationships that participants developed with staff members. Staff actively foster these bonds by sharing personal experience, which is highly regarded by the youth participants.

The B2OF year-end report highlighted that even among youth who consent to participate in the B2OF program, on average, participants receive less than 50% of the target goals for program hours. Here, we outlined several barriers to program attendance, with the most prevalent barrier being safety concerns. Caretaking responsibilities emerged as another important factor affecting consistent program attendance. Some participants also mention program attendance conflicts between B2OF programming and work schedules. Often, the same reasons youth list for disengaging with school also play a role in the consistency of their engagement with B2OF programming.

### Academic Programming

In the B2OF year-end report, we found that while more than 150 students enrolled in a course with Edmentum, only about 12 students had completed a course with a passing grade. The focus groups showed that fewer than half of the 52 youth participants said they had ever used Edmentum for online learning. When asked, young people largely reported either liking online learning or at least having neutral feelings about it, and none openly discussed disliking online learning. However, a key takeaway was that students struggled with motivation to use the online learning platform. While some mentioned liking the idea of online learning, several noted that it could be difficult to find a distraction-free environment to focus on the online learning. Staff also highlighted that many of the B2OF participants are so far behind in school that it would be difficult for them to engage in the online lessons provided without assistance.

As part of the B2OF programming, young people also worked with staff to set ambitious and fulfilling goals for the future. Many of their goals were career-related, while others were more general to the lifestyle young people wished to live. However, staff noted there was still a disconnect between setting these goals and convincing young people about the importance of re-engaging with some type of educational programming either during or after B2OF.

### Mental Health Programming

Focus group youth participants expressed a reluctance to engage in therapy due in part to a perceived stigma associated with talking about their feelings. Many were particularly wary of sharing personal feelings and experiences with new adults. Despite initial hesitance, several participants reported that mental health programming was the component of B2OF they most enjoyed once they built a trusting relationship with providers. Staff in the focus groups were largely in agreement that the mental health component of B2OF was particularly important for the program's target population, young people who have often experienced severely traumatic events.

Staff working on the mental health programming noted challenges to effectively administering CBT. A significant challenge clinicians face is taking an individualized approach to meet the diverse needs of participants while operating in a group setting. And while some young people eventually open up to the idea of therapy, it can be difficult to convince young people to adopt new coping mechanisms that involve talking about their feelings in place of more ingrained coping mechanisms that young people are used to drawing on.

### Staff Experiences

Staff make a concerted effort to connect with youth participants and genuinely care about their wellbeing. Students and staff mention that it is common for young people to rely on the support of staff members outside of regularly scheduled programming hours, calling for help with childcare or for advice during weeknights or weekends. Staff members noted a lack of formal organizational supports they could rely on to take care of their own mental health and wellbeing, despite the highly emotional topics they delved into with youth participants.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

B2OF represents a groundbreaking initiative aimed at re-engaging disconnected students who face an elevated risk of gun violence involvement. Our analysis of focus group data underscores the program's capacity to effectively form connections between staff and participants that keep students coming back to B2OF programming. However, there is room for improvement in effectively providing services to participants. We highlight four recommendations based on the findings in this report.

### 1 Enhance strategies to keep participants safe.

Enhancing the safety of youth participants is a key goal of B2OF, and while staff work with young people to create individualized plans to promote safety, focus group participants still list safety concerns as a barrier to attending programming consistently and as a concern that has kept them away from school, work, or even leaving their house on a daily basis. Engaging and supporting family members and providing opportunities for participants to form friendships with one another may expand social support networks for young people inside and outside of programming.

### 2 Adapt the mental health and academic programming to meet the individual needs of participants.

Personalizing services is important for both youth participation and program engagement. Streamlining staff access to transcripts, IEPs and 504 plans may equip staff to better understand participants' academic needs. [Prior Education Lab research](#) also shows that young people face individual challenges and benefit from a personalized approach. While there were barriers to using an online learning format when it came to student engagement, [prior Education Lab research with Saga Tech](#) shows that strategically combining education technology with a tutor can help students remain engaged and learn more than using technology alone. Additionally, establishing formal points of connection with CPS high schools could provide a clear path for participants to re-engage in school.

### 3 Establish a comprehensive support system for staff.

The [year-end B2OF](#) report revealed that all three CBOs experienced challenges with hiring and retaining staff. Staff turnover can prevent youth from having consistent and reliable contact within the program, and the focus group findings here highlight the pivotal role that strong staff-participant relationships play in program engagement. Staff reported a lack of formal support systems and faced obstacles to taking vacation time or time off in the evenings after work, which can contribute to burnout. Addressing these issues is imperative for CPS, the State of Illinois, and the CBOs to improve staff wellbeing, combat burnout, and increase staff retention.

### 4 Incorporate civics education to foster self-efficacy and community building.

Youth mention instances of racial discrimination in school and work settings. A civics education component covering topics such as community organizing, labor rights, and voting may help them learn about their rights and feel equipped to stand up to discrimination they encounter. This can also help young people to think about ways they can access power and enact changes within their communities.

## CONCLUSION

B2OF offers an unprecedented opportunity to address the decades of underinvestment in communities of color, which has led to significant barriers to high school graduation, post-secondary success, and safety for the program's target population. While B2OF has made significant strides in the first year of implementation, challenges remain in engaging and serving young people who are disconnected from school and at elevated predicted risk for gun violence.

Overcoming these barriers to successful implementation requires creativity, a deep understanding of youth experiences, and **a commitment to continuous improvement.**



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# Appendix

## STUDENT FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

### Agreements - 3 mins

Before we start with questions, I want to go over a few group agreements to make sure everyone feels comfortable sharing what they think. I'll read a few and then ask you all if there's anything you want to add.

- What is said in this room stays in this room
  - My goal is to make sure this is a safe and confidential space
  - However, if anything makes you feel uncomfortable please let me or a staff member know
- One mic - only one person talks at a time so we can hear what they are saying
- Assume best intentions- we will try to not to judge what others say

Anything you would like to add?

...

Great, let's get started then with an activity.

### Ice Breaker - 5 mins

Go around the room, raise your hand if the following applies to you....

- You like cats more than dogs
- You like basketball more than boxing
- You like tacos more than hot dogs

Okay great, now I'm going to ask you a little bit more about yourself. Raise your hand if..

- You have brothers or sisters
- You have any kids or take care of your younger siblings
- You've ever had a job or your own business

### Background

*First, I'd like to ask you a little bit about yourself.*

1. Let's go around the room, can you each say your age and how long you've been in Back to our future?
2. How did you first hear about Back to Our Future?
  - a. How was it described to you?
3. Have you ever been a part of a program like this here or anywhere else?
  - a. *If yes:* Can you briefly describe it?



## Program Experience

Now I'm going to ask you more about your experience in B2OF so far. It's important that we get your honest feedback on it so that we can make changes that make it better for you and young people who may participate in the future.

1. Now that you've been in Back to our Future for a while, how do you describe it to people in your life?
  - a. *Follow up:* What do you tell people you are coming to doing here?
2. What are the main reason you decided to participate in B2OF?
  - a. Was there any reasons that made you not want to sign up at first?
  - b. What is the main reason you continue coming to B2OF?
3. On days where you don't show up to B2OF, what are some of the reasons?
  - a. *Follow up:* transportation, childcare, work, family issues, other responsibilities
  - b. Are B2OF staff ever able to help with that?
4. When you come to Back to our Future, do you feel safe here?
  - a. *Follow up:* How come?
5. What part of B2OF do you like the most?
  - a. *Follow up:* Why is that?
6. What part of B2OF do you like the least?
  - a. *Follow up:* Why is that?
7. How many of you have used Edmentum, the online learning platform? (show of hands)
  - a. For those of you who have used it, what do you think about it?
8. If you could change anything about the program, what would it be?

## School and Daily Context

Thanks so much for sharing your opinions about the program with me. Now I'm going to ask you a little bit more about your experience in school and in your day-to-day life.

1. Outside of Back to Our Future, what are other things you spend your time doing?
  - a. Who (if anyone) do you usually do that with?
2. Do any of you have a job currently or other way of making money?
  - a. If yes, tell me more about your job, what do you do?
  - b. Do you feel safe doing that job?
3. About how many hours of sleep do you get every night?
4. Imagine you are in a situation where you need help, do you have someone in your life you could call?
  - a. Examples:
    - i. You need to get home but forgot your phone and bus card and are too far to walk
    - ii. You're feeling overwhelmed and need someone to talk to (ex: a breakup)
  - b. *Follow up:* This can be anyone from a friend to someone who works here or a caretaker
5. What are some ways in which you take care of yourself when you're going through a hard time?
6. I know some of you mentioned that you haven't been in school for a while, and I'll ask you more about that in my next question, but for now I want you to imagine that a new student is coming to Chicago who doesn't know anything about the school you went to. How would you describe it to them?
7. For those of you who are not currently in school, why did you decide or have to stop going to school?
  - a. Did anyone help you make that decision?
  - b. Did you feel safe in school?
8. Do you want to go back to school? (*yes or no? go around the room*)
  - a. *Follow up:* how come?

## Reflection on Future Goals/Aspirations

*For this last set of questions, I am going to ask you about how think about your future.*

- What are your goals after your time here, for example, where do you see yourself 5 years from now? [*Take a second to think about how old you will be in 5 years.*]
  - *Follow up:* For example, where do you live? Work? Go to school?
  - Do you think what you are doing now in B2OF is going to help you achieve them?
- Thinking about this past year, what is something you are most proud of yourself for?

## Other

- Imagine you are a senior advisor to Chicago's Mayor, Brandon Johnson; what would you tell him he needs to do to support young people in our city?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share with me that we haven't covered?

## STAFF FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

### Staff Background

*First, I'd like to ask you a little bit about yourself and your work.*

1. Let's go around the room, can you state your job title and how long you've been working on Back to Our Future?
2. Show of hands: How many of you have had a job before that is similar to your current role?
  - a. *Ask each person who says yes to briefly state what their role was*

### B2OF Participants

*Let's start off by talking about participants and how you bring youth into Back to Our Future.*

1. Describe your first contact with a young person you are trying to bring into B2OF, how do you describe the program?
2. What are some of the reasons youth refuse to join?
  - a. Is there anyone who says no initially but then decides to join?
    - i. What makes them change their mind?
3. What expectations do you set for youth as soon as they consent to the program?
  - a. How do you communicate these expectations to young people in the program?
4. What are some of the characteristics of youth who you think B2OF works well for?
  - a. How can you tell?
5. What are some characteristics of youth who you think B2OF does not work well for?
  - a. How can you tell?
6. How do students' needs vary across age? Gender? Community area?
7. What are your interactions like with a youth's surrounding community?
  - a. Including: school, family, friends
  - b. Are there other interactions with youth that you think are not captured in program data?
8. From what you've learned from working with youth, what are some reasons that young people in B2OF chose to leave school?
  - a. How do you usually find this out? (intake, youth, their family, school etc..)

9. How do you think Back to Our Future is different than school?
10. Given that a lot of youth have been disconnected from a daily school routine, what are some strategies you use to keep youth coming back to programming multiple days a week?
  - a. Is there a change in attendance once the paid 12 weeks end?
    - i. If so, what do you tell youth to keep them coming?
11. What activities/program elements are youth most interested in?
  - a. *Follow up:* Why do you think that is?
12. What activities are youth least interested in?
  - a. *Follow up:* Why do you think that is?
13. What has surprised you the most about working with youth in B2OF?

### Facilitators/Barriers

*Now we're going to switch gears and talk about what things make implementing programming easier and what are some challenges to doing so.*

*To start off we'll go through each of the 5 program areas plus outreach and talk about what helps you do those well, and then ask about challenges for those same program areas in the next question.*

1. Can you name a few things that help implement programming? Specifically ...
  - a. Outreach (definition: anything that helps get youth to participate in B2OF)
    - i. For example: existing relationship, family support, youth characteristic or context, investing in "pre-conditions", etc...
  - b. Community building
  - c. Mental health
  - d. Soft skills
  - e. Academic programming and credit recovery
  - f. Mentoring and family advocacy and support services
2. Can you name a few things that make it challenging to implement programming? Specifically...
  - a. Outreach (definition: anything that helps get youth to participate in B2OF)
    - i. For example: existing relationship, family support, youth characteristic or context, investing in "pre-conditions", etc...
  - b. Community building
  - c. Mental health
  - d. Soft skills
  - e. Academic programming and credit recovery
  - f. Mentoring and family advocacy and support services
3. Are there any supports you think could be helpful but you are not able to offer?
  - a. What resources or partnerships would you need to offer these supports?
4. What partnerships do you rely on to help deliver B2OF programming and other supports?
5. We know that you work with youth who have had to overcome a lot of challenges, which can be difficult for anyone day in and day out. What supports are in place for you to deal with secondhand trauma and prevent burnout (program staff)?
6. We know there were some changes to the program in recent months, including having a more standardized schedule.
  - a. How have youth reacted to this?
  - b. How did you all adapt to this?
    - i. What were some challenges and how did you overcome them?
7. B2OF uses data to inform programming and track progress – what was it like to start collecting data for this program?
  - a. Had you done anything like this before?
  - b. What has been the biggest challenge?

## Other

1. What part of B2OF are you most proud of?
  - a. Is there a specific success story that comes to mind?
2. Your organization is working with CPS and The University of Chicago Education to learn about how best to support youth in B2OF. We value any input you have on this partnership. That being said, is there anything you are hoping to learn about youth in this program or through this partnership?
  - a. This is an open question so if you ever want to reach out to reach out to me feel free to do so!
3. Is there anything else you'd like to share that we didn't cover?