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Promising Workforce Strategies from Across the Reimagine Retail Network

The Benefits of Bridging Divides: How YouthBuild Philly Shares its Supportive Practices to Build Business Value and Better Jobs

Jenny Weissbourd & Amanda Newman · January 2020

We're showing that good youth development practices are just good business practices. There's a feel-good element to YouthBuild Philly's principles, but they're also good business — you have less turnover, young people stay longer. If your employees believe in your mission and in your business, there's a lot of benefit to that financially. So, it's not just about how do you work with this young person, but how do you work with any person coming into their first job opportunity? How do you have a culture that invites people to grow and learn and be mentored in a space — whether that's a work or a school space?

— Robin Walker, Learning Exchange Director, YouthBuild Philly

Pictured above: Robin Walker, Learning Exchange Director at YouthBuild Philly, works with a student.



Executive Summary

Many workforce development organizations focus on helping people prepare for and connect to employment opportunities. A growing number are expanding their services and increasingly focusing on supporting employers to improve workers' job stability and mobility opportunities. This profile documents how YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School (YouthBuild Philly) partners with retail businesses to shape the workplace experiences of the young people the organization serves.

Workforce development organizations can at times underestimate [the potential value](#)¹ they bring to employers. As YouthBuild Philly shows, providers can use the supportive practices they have developed internally to build better business relationships and improve outcomes for the people they serve. By sharing YouthBuild Philly's culture of respect and belonging with employers, the organization is helping strengthen employers' supervision and retention of young people.

For instance, YouthBuild Philly provides training and capacity building services to front-line retail supervisors to instill supportive management practices. Front-line managers are a key factor in young people's job satisfaction and retention. Businesses report that the supportive practices supervisors learn are useful not only for retaining young workers but for improving engagement across their entire workforce.

Reimagine Retail, an initiative of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program funded by the Walmart Foundation, explores ways to enhance job quality and improve mobility for retail workers. In Philadelphia, we partner with five youth-serving organizations, including YouthBuild Philly. The Economic Opportunities Program also engages with these organizations through Generation Work, an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation that aims to connect young people — particularly individuals of color and those from low-income communities — with the knowledge and experience necessary to succeed in today's job market.

Founded in 1992, YouthBuild Philly's mission is "to empower young adults (18- to 20-year-olds) to develop skills and connect to opportunities by fostering an environment of love, support, and respect for their whole person."² Students earn a high school diploma, learn job skills, and connect to college and career opportunities.

This profile begins by recognizing how structural inequality impacts many young adults working in retail (pg. 3). It then outlines how the principles that shape YouthBuild Philly's culture of respect and belonging — including restorative practices, positive youth development, and a trauma-informed approach — guide the practices its staff recommend to business partners (pg. 5).

The profile then presents three key practices that YouthBuild Philly uses to engage retail business partners and promote retention and engagement of young adult workers:

1. **Identify “good-fit” business partnerships that set young people up for success (pg. 7).**
2. **Strengthen front-line management through coaching and feedback (pg. 9).**
3. **Provide customized training to help business partners institutionalize supportive culture and management (pg. 12).**

The profile then offers two case studies (pg. 13) to demonstrate how YouthBuild Philly applies these practices on the ground and the benefits of the work as reported by retailers. Brown's Superstores Inc. — ShopRite! and Gap Inc. have worked closely with YouthBuild Philly to hire, retain, and advance young people. These businesses' approaches, and YouthBuild Philly's engagement with them, offer lessons for other workforce providers seeking to improve jobs and career mobility for young people and for entry-level workers of all ages.

Historically, workforce development funding streams have incentivized providers to focus primarily on referrals to employment and related job placement metrics. Today, more and more organizations like YouthBuild Philly are also prioritizing strategies that promote economic stability and mobility for workers, including supportive management and clear pathways to advancement. The profile closes by acknowledging the challenges that workforce development organizations face in finding resources to support their work with employers to improve job quality and retention (pg. 22). As YouthBuild Philly's work demonstrates, there is a clear need for additional funding to spread these promising strategies.

¹ <http://www.thepinkertonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Pinkerton-Papers-2-FINAL-WEB.pdf>

² <https://youthbuildphilly.org/about/>.

Retail, Young Adults, and Racial Equity

Structural inequality – the historical and institutional barriers to accessing high-quality education, employment, housing, health care, and opportunity that must be addressed to foster equitable prosperity – leads to racial disparities in outcomes. In Philadelphia, [14.4%](#)³ of residents are between the ages of 16 and 24 and are disconnected from both school and work, a population commonly referred to as “opportunity youth.”⁴ As in many other cities, the majority of Philadelphia disconnected youth are people of color. Nearly 20% of Black and Latinx young adults are disconnected from both school and work, compared with just 3% of young white adults.⁵

The retail and service sectors provide many [entry-level jobs](#)⁶ that can teach young adults foundational employment skills. However, disconnected youth confront challenges driven by structural inequality and may experience [bias](#)⁷ from managers on the basis of their race, age, gender identity, or other factors. Nationally, people of color are overrepresented in entry-level retail positions and underrepresented in management. As one YouthBuild Philly alumna describes her experience of bias in a retail job, “My manager treated me different than everybody. She was so happy with everybody else but when she came to me her whole demeanor changed.” Workforce organizations seeking to prepare young adults for sustainable careers can strengthen their programs by adopting strategies that advance racial equity.

Building Capacity to Advance Racial Equity

The approaches YouthBuild Philly is using to explicitly address racial bias can take time to cultivate, as staff build new knowledge, skills, and trust to hold what can be challenging conversations with program participants and partners. For many organizations, engaging peers or working with a consultant can help. YouthBuild Philly uses internal capacity building to build staff comfort and awareness.

We create professional development spaces that are sometimes all-staff and sometimes opt-in where we have conversations on race and social identity. You have to practice it and continue to do the work. If you're not having the conversations then you're not going to get any better at having the conversations. The goal of the conversation isn't that everyone leaves feeling comfortable, it's that you had real conversations around the ways systems are influencing young people and ourselves as practitioners in the space.

– Scott Emerick, Executive Director, YouthBuild Philly

At the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program, we are on a journey to strengthen our own racial equity lens and practices to inform our work and contribute to the workforce field. We are grateful to YouthBuild Philly for the opportunity to learn from its approaches to embedding equity in all aspects of its work.

³ https://www.phila.gov/media/20180205133517/FUELINGPHILADELPHIASTALENTENGINGE_FULLSTRATEGY.pdf

⁴ There has been much discussion about the appropriateness of the term “opportunity youth” and other labels used to describe young people. For instance, see: <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/04/28/399949478/delinquent-dropout-at-risk-whats-in-a-name>. We recognize the limitations of this term but include it here due to its wide use in the field.

⁵ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/employment-and-disconnection-among-teens-and-young-adults-the-role-of-place-race-and-education/>

⁶ <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/now-jobs-young-adult-workforce-programming/>

⁷ <https://www.demos.org/research/retail-race-divide-how-retail-industry-perpetuating-racial-inequality-21st-century>

Preparing Young People for Retail Jobs: YouthBuild Philly's History in the Retail Sector

YouthBuild Philly supports alumni transitioning into varied career opportunities, which have traditionally included retail pathways. In 2014, the organization launched its Customer Service Excellence Training (CSET) program in partnership with Starbucks and the Schultz Family Foundation. Part of YouthBuild Philly's Business Administration vocational track, CSET prepares students for employment in retail and related sectors such as food service and hospitality. Students can build their customer service skills by working as cashiers and baristas in YouthBuild Philly's on-site café. YouthBuild Philly students also must complete 80 hours of on-the-job training as part of their graduation requirements, often in retail settings such as clothing and grocery stores.

Staff note that retail is the primary sector in which alumni work, not only for students who participated in CSET but for all YouthBuild Philly students. YouthBuild Philly staff describe retail as a valuable first job opportunity that can help address students' immediate income needs, give them early work experience, and help them explore their strengths and interests. Staff also note that retail can offer career pathways to specialized and managerial positions within the sector and can help workers develop competencies applicable to future occupations. At the same time, staff explain that not all retail jobs are providing a quality pathway. Through the deep engagement with retail partners described throughout this profile, YouthBuild Philly leaders note that they are working to ensure quality pathways are the rule — not the exception — for students transitioning into retail jobs.



YouthBuild Philly students collaborate at the onsite café.

YouthBuild Philly's Supportive Culture: A Model for Retailers

YouthBuild Philly's approach to business partnerships stems directly from the organization's internal practices. In fact, many retail leaders are so struck by the organization's inclusive culture and students' high engagement that they ask for help incorporating aspects of Youthbuild Philly's approach into their stores.

Staff work to cultivate a welcoming and safe culture for students within YouthBuild Philly's walls. "When people enter the space, what they feel is our climate and culture," explains Zuri Stone, director of student life. "It can seem magical, but it's actually very intentional." Staff draw on several interrelated principles to foster YouthBuild Philly's supportive culture. Underlying each of these principles is the formation of strong, trusting relationships between students and staff. "Every aspect of our model is about relationship building," says Stone.

Principles that inform YouthBuild Philly's culture include the following:

Restorative practices

YouthBuild Philly uses [restorative practices](#)⁸ to proactively build relationships, trust, and personal connections among students and staff. This helps foster a healthy community and prevent and resolve conflict. For instance, staff involve students directly in discussions and next steps to resolve any harm they have caused other members of the YouthBuild Philly community. By focusing on resolution rather than punishment, YouthBuild Philly seeks to transform students' mindsets and behavior over time.



In community meetings, YouthBuild Philly staff intentionally foster a supportive culture.

⁸ <https://www.iirp.edu/defining-restorative/overview>

Positive youth development

YouthBuild Philly promotes [positive youth development](#)⁹ (PYD), “the process of providing support, relationships, resources, and opportunities needed [for young people] to become successful and competent adults.”¹⁰ For instance, YouthBuild Philly establishes supportive relationships between students and staff, including through staff mentors who hold one-on-one check-ins with students about school, work, and personal life. YouthBuild Philly’s model also creates opportunities for students to feel they belong, such as through regular community meetings and norms that guide respectful communication. Additionally, students have opportunities to build skills in supportive settings, including in the on-site café.

Trauma-informed approach

Over half of US adolescents are estimated to have encountered a potentially traumatic experience,¹¹ and [research suggests](#)¹² that, due to structural and institutional factors, Black and Latinx children disproportionately experience adversities that can cause trauma.¹³ To address this, YouthBuild Philly staff employ a trauma-informed approach, which includes methods for working with young people who have been exposed to trauma. For instance, staff [understand](#)¹⁴ that many of their students can and do experience trauma. Staff are trained to recognize and respond to signs of trauma and foster a safe and predictable environment. YouthBuild Philly students also have access to counseling sessions with trained therapists and case managers.



YouthBuild Philly’s culture helps young people feel safe and practice skills in a supportive setting.

⁹ <https://www.childtrends.org/how-about-implementing-positive-youth-development-with-emerging-adults-and-adults>

¹⁰ Child Trends, a research organization focused on children and youth, has done significant research related to PYD. The organization draws on the following source to define PYD: Bernat, D. H., Resnick, & M. D. (2016). Healthy youth development: Sciences and strategies. *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, 12, S1-S3.

¹¹ McLaughlin, K. A., Koenen, K. C., Hill, E. D., Petukhova, M., Sampson, N. A., Zaslavsky, A. M., & Kessler, R. C. (2013). Trauma exposure and posttraumatic stress disorder in a US national sample of adolescents. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 52, 815-830.

¹² <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/how-to-implement-trauma-informed-care-to-build-resilience-to-childhood-trauma>

¹³ Slopen, N., Shonkoff, J. P., Albert, M. A., Yoshikawa, H., Jacobs, A, Stoltz, R., & Williams, D. R. (2016). Racial disparities in child adversity in the U.S.: Interaction with family immigration history and income. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 50(1), 47-56.

¹⁴ <https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/trauma-informed>

Three Key Practices to Promote Retention and Engagement

YouthBuild Philly pursues practices with retail partners informed by its internal culture. Below, we outline three key practices YouthBuild Philly is pursuing with retailers to promote job stability and mobility for its employed students. These practices not only foster young people's success at work but can increase retention and engagement for all workers.

Practice 1: Identify "good-fit" business partnerships that set young people up for success.

YouthBuild Philly prioritizes employer partnerships with businesses that offer good-fit job opportunities for students. Components of what makes a [good fit](#)¹⁵ include workplace and scheduling practices that support young people's success transitioning to the workforce as well as their ability to persist at school, as outlined below.

Business practices that make employment opportunities a good fit for YouthBuild Philly students include the following:

Treating YouthBuild Philly students as assets to the business

YouthBuild Philly staff report successful relationships with business partners who recognize the long-term value its students bring to the business. "Something we're adamant about is that employers work with us not out of charity but because they have a workforce need and we can help them meet it," says Michael Imperato, YouthBuild Philly's former director of talent and organizational projects. "This is what makes the relationship sustainable and drives company buy-in to support and retain students."

Providing schedules that accommodate students' educational and career goals

Like many young adults, YouthBuild Philly students and alumni are balancing jobs with personal and caregiving responsibilities, as well as activities outside of work to advance their academic and career goals. YouthBuild Philly looks for employer partners that offer [stable and predictable schedules](#).¹⁶

¹⁵ <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/now-jobs-young-adult-workforce-programming/>

¹⁶ <https://hbr.org/2018/03/research-when-retail-workers-have-stable-schedules-sales-and-productivity-go-up>



Providing a clear career pathway for advancement within the company

[Research suggests](#)¹⁷ that young people are more likely to stay in jobs that offer opportunities for advancement. YouthBuild Philly staff work with employer partners to identify and communicate career pathways and provide information about the competencies and time frames necessary for employees to advance. “Providing a realistic pathway can help manage students’ expectations and keep them in a job,” explains Robin Walker, YouthBuild Philly’s learning exchange director. Staff also note that encouraging employers to use career pathway standards can help reduce bias and increase equity in promotion decisions since promotions are made on the basis of explicit performance and competency expectations.

Providing a support system to promote employee stability and retention

YouthBuild Philly advises all companies it works with to offer supports to promote student success in the workplace. Examples include hiring employees in store locations closest to where they live and that are

convenient to transportation lines, identifying employees to serve as mentors who provide informal guidance and encouragement to students outside of a traditional supervisory role, and establishing a [clear onboarding process](#)¹⁸ that outlines workplace policies and expectations for students at the start of employment. “Having a mentor, having strong onboarding – these are the types of things that create a support system for young people in the workplace,” says Imperato.

Over time, YouthBuild Philly staff have expanded the questions they [ask employers](#)¹⁹ to identify and encourage workplace practices they have found foster student success. Staff use an internal matrix tool to assess businesses based on the experience they give students, the likelihood of students being both hired and retained, and the depth of the businesses’ relationships with YouthBuild Philly staff.²⁰ Staff describe the businesses they engage with as being on a continuum as it relates to workplace practices, and they note that they work individually with businesses to promote adoption of practices that support student success. “Whenever possible, we try to influence business practices from the inside rather than backing away from a partnership, although that sometimes proves necessary,” explains Emerick.

¹⁷ <https://www.fsg.org/blog/four-guiding-principles-rethinking-your-workforce>

¹⁸ <https://hbr.org/2018/12/to-retain-new-hires-spend-more-time-onboarding-them>

¹⁹ <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/question-bank-for-workforce-service-providers-a-tool-for-working-with-retailers/>

²⁰ For an example of a matrix service providers can use to assess businesses’ employment practices and the quality of experiences they offer workers, please see pages 24 to 25 of Reimagine Chicagoland’s toolkit at Reimagining Employer Engagement: <https://www.reimaginechicago.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Reimagining-Employer-Engagement-A-Toolkit-for-Providers.pdf>.

Practice 2: Strengthen front-line management through coaching and feedback.

To foster ongoing communication between businesses and YouthBuild Philly staff, employer partners designate a key staff contact at the business who is responsible for supporting YouthBuild Philly students. Describing the staff contact role, Imperato explains, “Whether this is a district-level human resources professional or a store manager, the staff contact should be someone who can influence practices both higher up within the company as well as at the store level.”

While a business partnership is under way, YouthBuild Philly staff draw on feedback from students and in-person store visits to offer ongoing coaching and input to employer staff contacts to encourage front-line management practices that foster supportive workplace cultures. Coaching and feedback are also opportunities to address workplace challenges in ways that acknowledge the perspectives of both the businesses and YouthBuild Philly students. “We use a restorative lens when there’s a problem in the workplace,” explains Stone. “Business contacts share their experience, and we share the experience of the student. Then we talk about the best way to move forward together.”

The following are three of the areas in which YouthBuild Philly staff focus when providing feedback and coaching related to front-line management practices:

Demonstrating empathy

YouthBuild Philly encourages front-line managers to have direct conversations with students to better understand their lives outside of work. “In retail, there’s a level of empathy you must have for your employees,” explains Ameen Akbar, former YouthBuild Philly director of student life. “There’s a way to go about helping to guide a young person in the workplace when you feel things aren’t on track. You have to understand what a young person is experiencing to understand what it takes to develop them.”

Encouraging Workplace Empathy

We had a situation where a young person was doing the task that was asked but wasn’t smiling and so was graded and critiqued very hard by his manager. I explained to his manager about how he’s from a community in Philly where you don’t just smile in general walking down the street. The manager wasn’t aware because this wasn’t his experience in his community. He was then able to give the direct feedback that, “Hey, you’re customer facing. What does it look like to greet somebody in a friendly way with a smile? You should do that more.”

— Robin Walker, YouthBuild Philly Learning Exchange Director

Empathy in Action

Our partnership with YouthBuild has helped us deepen our understanding of where our associates are coming from in order to support them. If home life isn’t right, it bleeds into work life. We have to understand our associates in order to retain them.

— Marie Wagner, HR Supervisor, Brown’s ShopRite



Providing timely and ongoing feedback

One way managers can [integrate positive youth development](#)²¹ into workplace settings is by [providing timely and ongoing feedback](#)²² to help employees improve their skills. This is particularly important for

young people, who are often new to the workforce. YouthBuild Philly staff encourage different approaches for giving employee feedback, including one-on-one conversations, one-minute check-ins to offer real-time feedback, and public shout-outs to recognize employees' successes.

Encouraging Supportive Feedback

We had a young person who had been working with one of our partners for three months and got very upset that he hadn't been promoted. In fact, he had only been on his job three months and was still learning. But he became friends with his supervisor, who then wouldn't give him honest and productive feedback. For instance, he wouldn't say, "You need to remember to take out the trash on these specific days," even when this type of issue came up.

My contact was the HR manager at that time, and when we talked about this she was really taken aback and was able to have a conversation with this manager. I think it was an aha moment on both sides. I didn't realize that I had to tell a store manager that becoming friends with someone doesn't change their need for feedback and support.

— Robin Walker, Learning Exchange Director, YouthBuild Philly

Supportive Feedback in Action

Just like at YouthBuild, my managers always say, "I see you going far with things." Then they give you that little push like, "I could see you being a manager." Then they'll give you tips like, "Do less of this and do more of that." I think they all [have] faith; that's why they hired us. They always give us the hope that we can do it.

— YouthBuild Philly alumnus and Banana Republic associate

²¹ https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/PILOTchecklist_ChildTrends_April2018.pdf

²² <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/unlocking-the-potential-of-frontline-managers>

Fostering respect and belonging

[Recent research](#)²³ finds that, for young people, being treated fairly and with respect is one of the most important components of a quality job.²⁴ At YouthBuild Philly, staff find it particularly important to address with employer partners situations in which students are treated differently or disrespectfully. For instance, a student once came to YouthBuild Philly staff reporting management checked the student's bags for stolen merchandise without cause. Staff also report instances in which students believed they were denied promotions despite meeting performance requirements. In situations like these, YouthBuild staff talk with managers to understand what happened, work to repair harm, and transform behavior moving forward.

Fostering Respect and Belonging in Action

Our mission is about social change, so we want to know that our employer partners are aligned if we're going to be sending students to them. That they're not just telling students that they need to fit into a certain workplace culture that excludes them. So we work to have honest conversations with our partners to fight social stereotypes.

— Zuri Stone, Director of Student Life, YouthBuild Philly

Coaching YouthBuild Philly Students

In addition to coaching employer partners, YouthBuild Philly staff also coach students to help them cultivate skills to navigate the workplace and advocate for themselves. Staff regularly hold one-on-one check-ins with students and meet with them when workplace conflicts arise. In conversations, staff note that they often encourage students to communicate directly with their supervisors about their needs to help improve their workplace experiences.

One of our students had some challenges being a new mother and needing to go to the WIC [a public nutrition and health program for pregnant women, mothers, and caregivers of infants and young children] office. Instead of telling her supervisor in advance, she needed to take off work at the last minute. We talked about, "How can you take a step back and plan a little bit farther in advance? How can you communicate this to your manager, and what do the conversations look like?" So she was able to go back and have this conversation so that she and her manager were on the same page.

— Jackie Giovanelli, former This Way Ahead Program Manager, YouthBuild Philly

²³ <https://hbr.org/2017/12/how-to-improve-the-engagement-and-retention-of-young-hourly-workers>

²⁴ Reimagine Retail partners including YouthBuild Philly conducted focus groups with young people to understand what makes them succeed and stay in a job, and findings align with this research. Young people shared that what matters most to them is a sense of respect and autonomy in the workplace.

Practice 3: Provide customized training to help business partners institutionalize supportive culture and management.

To help business partners learn about promising practices for supporting students, YouthBuild Philly conducts trainings for employer partners in which company staff role-play scenarios designed to address common workplace challenges.

We have conversations in our manager training [with YouthBuild Philly] on how to take into consideration different personal things that might be happening in students' lives and how these can impact them at work. Our leaders learn empathic leadership. And we're able to expand that and just say, how does that support a more engaged environment in our stores in general?

– Kent Bollack, District Manager, Gap Inc.

Customized training

With select employer partners, YouthBuild Philly provides employer-customized trainings to build the capacity of front-line managers to support YouthBuild

Philly students and other workers. Staff note that opportunities to offer direct training often evolve over the course of a partnership and can stem from partners' interest in adopting aspects of YouthBuild Philly's school culture in the workplace. "There are a lot of things in YouthBuild culture that translate to a more engaged environment at the store level," says Imperato. "Shout-outs, understanding what's happening in students' lives outside of work – these connect to recognition and engagement and translate to employee productivity."

To inform content for customized trainings, YouthBuild Philly staff administer employer staff surveys that ask about workforce needs and challenges. Staff then create a curriculum that draws on aspects of YouthBuild Philly's internal practices, including positive youth development, trauma awareness, and restorative practices. Staff explain that employer trainings, while drawing on social science theory, are grounded in real-world practice. "We prioritize HR language in these trainings because that's what resonates with employers," says Imperato.

Putting Supportive Management Into Practice: Two Retail Case Studies

How does YouthBuild Philly work with business partners to apply these practices? The following case studies illustrate how retailers engage with YouthBuild

Philly to implement new practices with workers and the benefits reported by retail supervisors and business leaders.

Case Study 1: Brown's Superstores Inc. — Shoprite!

In their own words, YouthBuild Philly and Brown's Superstores Inc. — ShopRite! (ShopRite) staff describe the history and impact of this partnership. A YouthBuild Philly staff member shares why ShopRite is a good-fit employment opportunity for students and how YouthBuild Philly communicates with and

coaches ShopRite managers. ShopRite's HR director explains why YouthBuild Philly students are an asset to the business and what this retailer has learned about the business value of designing jobs that provide stability and mobility for young people.



YouthBuild Philly students pose in the hallway. Retailers report that students are engaged, committed employees – an asset to their business.

YouthBuild Philly Staff Spotlight: Coaching Brown's ShopRite to Promote Student Success and Workplace Retention

There are several factors that make ShopRite a good employment opportunity for our students. Our contacts at ShopRite understand that, for the most part, this is students' first job, and they are willing to help them learn. They also understand students' need for flexibility around their schedules. They want to retain students long term so they want to help set them up for success.

The HR manager I work most closely with has had a chance to learn about YouthBuild Philly and who our students are. We communicate frequently. When one of our students is experiencing a challenge, I'll speak with the student and their career coordinator at YouthBuild Philly to find out if there's information I think is important for the employer to know. With students' consent, I'll share with the HR manager, who will share with the student's direct supervisor. We have a responsibility to make sure our employer partners have whatever critical information they need to support the young person, and supporting our students has been important for ShopRite as well.

ShopRite is working to be transparent with our students about what the pathway to advancement looks like within the company. Yes, for the time being this is a job, but it is also setting students up for a career. At YouthBuild Philly, we're prioritizing and measuring not only placement but also advancement – either within the company or to new opportunities or further education. How do you take the skills you're learning and apply them to additional opportunities in the retail sector? There are a number of paths to take in the retail industry, and we're thinking about career exposure. Even as a cashier you can learn about logistics or loss prevention. We're working to spark students' longer-term career interests in retail and beyond.

– Jennifer Rivers, [Interim] Director of Career Partnerships and Postsecondary Initiatives

Employer Spotlight: How Brown's ShopRite Incorporates YouthBuild Philly Coaching and Training to Strengthen Business Practices and Policies

Our partnership with YouthBuild Philly started about three years ago, when I attended a YouthBuild Philly event for employer partners with our CEO, Jeff Brown. We took a tour of the school and met students. We were impressed with the students and the programming. Having the retail training and exposure, handling cash and working on-site at YouthBuild as baristas — those things really prepare students for a retail environment. When you're there, you can feel the culture of trust between students and staff. Anecdotally, our retention and advancement rates are high for YouthBuild Philly students.

We often hire YouthBuild Philly students who are finishing their education and want to earn a little money on evenings and weekends. That's great and what retail can be for people — you don't need to make a choice between work and school. At ShopRite, most of our managers started when they were 16, 17, 18 — myself included. It started as a part-time job when we were going to school.

We work diligently to try to understand our workforce and the challenges they experience. For instance, we've learned that you can't transfer an associate from one store to another if it's not on the public transportation line. That can be a real hardship for an associate.

YouthBuild staff offered a customized training for our front-line managers, a modified version they created for us based on our feedback. The topics included conflict resolution and understanding challenges our associates are facing. Over the course of our partnership, YouthBuild Philly has helped surface challenges that have provided opportunities for us to coach, train, and further develop our managers internally. If not for the partnership, an associate might leave without us knowing why; instead, we have more insight into their experiences on the job.

Our partnership with YouthBuild Philly has also helped us deepen our understanding of the needs of our associates. For instance, based on feedback, we've lengthened our minimum shift length from four to five hours so that associates aren't traveling for more hours than they're getting paid. We tracked this and saw an uptick in retention. We've also adjusted our hiring and labor hours so that we can give our cashiers the number of hours they want. At one of our stores, we were consistently hiring 50 cashiers when the store only needed 40. When we increased cashier hours, this store moved from the lowest cashier retention to the highest.

— John Vining, HR Director, Brown's ShopRite

Case Study 2: Gap Inc. and This Way Ahead

One of YouthBuild Philly's largest retail partnerships is with Gap Inc. YouthBuild Philly is a local partner in [This Way Ahead](#),²⁵ Gap Inc.'s "life skills and on-the-job training program for opportunity youth."²⁶ This international program launched in 2007 to give young people an opportunity to develop on-the-job skills using Old Navy, Gap, Banana Republic, and Athleta stores as learning labs. More than 7,500 young people ages 16 to 24 have participated in the program.

Students selected for the program spend a 10-week paid summer internship working in a Gap Inc. store for about 12 hours a week, under the supervision of a store manager and with mentorship from a more experienced store employee who acts as a "Big Sib." For many young people, This Way Ahead provides their first job experience and the opportunity to transition to longer-term employment, typically in hourly, part-time roles.

Community partners like YouthBuild Philly recruit students to the program; prepare them through employability training, including mock interviews and resume building; and provide ongoing supports throughout the internship. For more than a decade, Gap Inc. has established promising practices to promote young people's success in the program. Each community partner also adds location- and population-specific knowledge that strengthens program delivery.

YouthBuild Philly helps young adults succeed in This Way Ahead through training, supportive coaching, and stipends for transportation and work-appropriate

clothing. YouthBuild Philly also helps students understand how a This Way Ahead internship might fit within a career pathway, inside or outside the retail sector.

YouthBuild has been an incredible partner. They are just an amazing organization because they put young people first and are committed to not just thinking about the young people right now, but also to what it takes to be a successful 35-year-old? They are preparing young people to get to that stage."

– Tes Cohen, former Manager of Community Partnerships, Gap Inc.

The sections that follow draw on the voices of Gap Inc. leaders and managers and YouthBuild Philly alumni to illustrate the benefits of the This Way Ahead program and engagement with YouthBuild Philly. Gap Inc.'s leaders share the tangible business advantages of hiring, developing, and supporting previously disconnected young people. A YouthBuild alumna explains how her experience at YouthBuild Philly, in This Way Ahead, and as a Gap associate with a supportive supervisor increased her confidence and helped her set career goals. Gap store and district managers describe how the This Way Ahead program and their engagement with YouthBuild Philly have influenced their management practices. Specifically, they speak about how they have strengthened empathy for and open communication with interns and entry-level workers and have cultivated a culture of respect and belonging in their stores.

²⁵ <https://www.gapincustainability.com/people/talent/way-ahead>

²⁶ <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20180815005168/en/Gap-Job-Program-Opportunity-Youth-53>



One of YouthBuild Philly's largest retail partnerships is with Gap, Inc.'s This Way Ahead program.

The Business Impact of Hiring and Supporting Young Workers

First launched through Gap Inc.'s corporate foundation, [This Way Ahead](#)²⁷ has evolved to meet core business needs for Gap Inc. Through This Way Ahead and community partners like YouthBuild Philly, store managers and corporate leaders can learn practices that improve business performance, including the value of hiring and developing young people previously disconnected from work. Justin Davis, city leader for This Way Ahead in Philadelphia, explains, "We learn so much from the internship program that impacts globally how we do our business and hire talent."

What we also know is that 38% of our store employees across the board are coming from similar backgrounds to those who are coming in through This Way Ahead. So there is no reason that these practices should not be adapted.

– Tes Cohen, former manager of community partnerships, Gap Inc.

Gap Inc.'s experience with This Way Ahead has helped the company rethink recruiting norms. Cohen says hiring managers have learned to hire for "potential, not credential" and see previously disconnected young people as valued contributors to their talent pipeline and talent management strategy.

²⁷ <https://www.gapincustainability.com/people/talent/way-ahead>

This Way Ahead provides a talent pipeline that is solving a business need. There is high turnover in retail, and what we've seen running the program over 12 years is that for young people that come through This Way Ahead, their tenure ends up being twice the length of [that of] typical sales associates. There's also an increase in diverse talent. About 96% of our This Way Ahead alumni self-identify as people of color. And our alumni tend to be highly engaged, as reflected in employee engagement surveys. So we have diverse, motivated talent that stays with us longer. That level of engagement is appealing for our business leaders and our customers, and that's really how we were able to make the business case.

– Tes Cohen, former manager of community partnerships, Gap Inc.

In 2015, the Gap Foundation recommended that Gap Inc. cover intern salaries via standard payroll (rather

than through foundation funds) given the demonstrated business benefits of the program. Cohen says, “In 2015 we made a commitment that by 2025 it is our goal that 5% of our entry-level employees are coming from This Way Ahead. So that's the path we're on now.” This Way Ahead is now in more than 50 cities globally.

We've grown to understand it to be a part of our talent management solution. It's giving us exposure to new talent that wasn't necessarily a population that we would have prioritized as part of our hiring. But we've seen the results from the program, whether it's employee engagement or reduced turnover. That really has an impact on our store environments. It's a program that we are committed to because we see it support the pipeline of talent into our stores.”

– Justin Davis, City Leader for This Way Ahead in Philadelphia, Gap Inc.

Using Retail as a Springboard: A YouthBuild Philly Alumna's Experience in This Way Ahead

I was really excited when YouthBuild had a job opportunity for us. I grew up wearing Gap clothes so I was like, "I could work for y'all." I like talking to people, so working there was just perfect for me. I didn't know how my first job was going to be, so working at a Gap store was amazing for my growth. Now I know what I can do. When I get a job, I know what I'm worth now, and I know what I should be applying for.

I loved my manager. She was open with me and there for me. We had a lot of honest conversations. There were times when I couldn't make it to work, and she would understand and work with me. There was no, "Oh, you didn't do that right; clock out." It was, "Take your time, you got it." They would help me if I didn't know how to properly fold jeans. They would direct me step-by-step and show me how to do it. It was good times for me there.

My journey to get to This Way Ahead was cool. I had help from YouthBuild to prep. They do mock interviews and get us ready. I honestly didn't know what kind of job I was ready for because I never worked before. I never knew what I was capable of doing. When I first came to YouthBuild and they shared so many opportunities, it really opened my eyes so I knew what I could do and what I'm capable of. Thanks to YouthBuild, I knew exactly where I wanted to go, what job I wanted, and how far I wanted to go. When they started talking about jobs, I was a little nervous because I had never worked before. But when they say you can do it, they mean it. You can do it.

YouthBuild wants people to end up in a job where they're happy. I learned that any job where I can talk to people and help people out makes me happy. At Gap you talk to people and help them find clothes. In home health you help the elderly. That got me interested in being a home health aide, and I'll be starting training soon.

When I graduated from YouthBuild, I was like, "I like school; this is nice. I could see myself doing this." When I was telling my manager at Gap about pursuing a career in home health, she was okay with it. Actually, she's the one who told me about the [local home health training program]. I still contact her to this day. They always supported me with anything I ever said I wanted to do. They were 110% right behind me, giving me information, numbers, anything to help me pursue my dream.

— YouthBuild Philly Alumna

Lessons Learned From YouthBuild Philly: Management Practices That Drive Retention

The section that follows highlights how Gap Inc. staff worked with YouthBuild Philly to incorporate supportive management practices. They share the value they found from using these new approaches for This Way Ahead interns and all front-line staff.

1. Demonstrating Empathy: Open Communication and Coaching

Through This Way Ahead, Gap Inc. store managers note that they have learned to talk with young people to understand challenges in employees' lives that may be getting in the way of success at work.

When we think about barriers like housing instability, homelessness, if you're a parent and you have child care to worry about, those are really significant barriers for anybody to be dealing with. But at the same time, of course they need to have a job, they need to be making money to be able to support their family and to be able to have housing stability.

– Tes Cohen, former Manager of Community Partnerships, Gap Inc.

Through This Way Ahead, Cohen adds, managers come to see “the value of having really open and honest conversations (with the employees they manage) around these challenges.”

YouthBuild Philly offers formal onboarding and informal coaching to This Way Ahead managers, who learn about the kinds of challenges young people in the program face and how these might impact their performance at work. For example, a YouthBuild Philly staff member might encourage a manager who

typically responds to tardiness with disciplinary actions to first ask why an intern is late. Upon learning, for example, that the student is having commuting challenges, that manager could explore switching the intern's hours or store location while setting a clear expectation that the intern will arrive on time in the future.

This Way Ahead managers are expected to check in with their interns at least weekly. YouthBuild Philly offers tips on checking in and opportunities to role-play during onboarding. For example, managers learn about “temperature checks,” a form of quick check-in used on campus at YouthBuild Philly in which young people use hand signals to indicate how they are feeling on a 1-to-5 scale.

Gap store manager Susan Nied describes how she learned to check in with her This Way Ahead interns during the internship. She overcame a common challenge in retail: Managers scheduled for different shifts than new workers may have fewer opportunities to train and mentor them.

Managers in a retail store don't have a Monday-through-Friday job, so I don't always see them [This Way Ahead interns] on all their shifts. I would make sure I had their schedule and schedule myself to work then so that we could just touch base. “How's work here? How's life? Is everything okay? How's school? Anything I need to know?” Sometimes with interns, it wasn't always like, “Let's fix it in the office.” Sometimes it was, “Let's take a walk around the block,” or we would talk when we were doing fitting room go-backs.

Nied finds that frequent communication with YouthBuild Philly staff and with her interns has helped her address issues to encourage success and retention:

[YouthBuild Philly's former This Way Ahead program manager] Jackie and I would talk once a week, more if necessary. She would clue me in if something was going on. We would be able to work together. ... I also told my interns, "Come and talk to me. Let's have a conversation. If you're struggling, tell me why. How can I help you? What's going on at work?" I would help them problem-solve. Take scheduling: They get their schedules two weeks in advance. So, if they ran into something they could request off ahead of time. But there's always something in school that can come up in the last minute. A teacher conference, I get it. Come and talk to me. "Can we swap shifts here?" It's all about coming and talking to me, giving me the why, and learning how to communicate. And for the most part, we fix it.

Recognizing that these practices can help her entire workforce, over time Nied has adapted check-ins for all her entry-level staff: "There were the check-ins scheduled for This Way Ahead but then I thought, 'Well, why can't I check in with all of my staff more consciously?' So I would do temperature checks with everybody then." Similarly, Cohen explains that This Way Ahead teaches store managers to be "really intentional about providing support and having coaching conversations. And our managers always talk about how they should be doing this with all of our employees."

2. Fostering Respect and Belonging: Learning From YouthBuild Philly's Culture

In Philadelphia, This Way Ahead helps young people feel a sense of belonging at work by integrating practices from YouthBuild Philly's culture and by welcoming interns into the company's culture. Through orientations and store tours, YouthBuild Philly students spend time getting a feel for the company even before they start the internship. They also meet Old Navy, Gap, Banana Republic and Athleta managers who visit YouthBuild Philly for orientation and volunteer engagements. At YouthBuild Philly, these managers experience an environment they describe as safe, supportive, and engaging — and they are often impressed by the talented students. Cohen says these interactions "really break down barriers on both sides. The young people get to meet managers and realize that they are normal people just like you or me. And on the flip side the managers get to meet the young people."

These leaders often bring elements of YouthBuild Philly's culture to their own stores. "We found that a lot of things in YouthBuild Philly culture actually translate well into our environments," says Kent Bollman, Philadelphia district manager. For example, many Gap Inc. store managers borrow YouthBuild Philly's "shout-outs," a motivational practice in which staff and young people publicly celebrate one another's accomplishments. According to Bollman, "There are some things like shout-outs that we'll intentionally do with this group because it connects to recognition, engagement — things that help with productivity in stores." Nied adds, "YouthBuild Philly creates a really fun culture, and I took a lot away from that. We started doing shout-outs with our whole team a lot. We started to have more fun."

Partnering With Businesses to Set Young People Up for Success: Lessons Learned From YouthBuild Philly

If we can translate YouthBuild student development to “What does good management of young people look like?” then we can show how these practices influence a business in a positive way. It costs less to promote from within as opposed to hire from the outside and train. If you can train a young person to be an effective employee based on your company values and they decide to stay on, then that saves the business money in the long run.

— Zuri Stone, Director of Student Life, YouthBuild Philly

YouthBuild Philly’s approach to business partnerships offers important lessons for workforce development service providers, especially those working with young people. Providers can help set participants up for success by expanding the scope of their partnerships with businesses. YouthBuild Philly begins by identifying employment opportunities with high potential to support and retain students. A central aspect of these good-fit opportunities is that business partners are eager to engage with YouthBuild Philly

staff to strengthen workforce practices over time. Through ongoing coaching and feedback, managers at business partnerships like ShopRite and Gap Inc. report improvements in their supervision of entry-level workers and higher worker engagement. Customized training also helps business partners learn from the principles and practices that shape YouthBuild’s inclusive, supportive culture.

Historically, workforce development funding streams have incentivized providers to focus primarily on referrals to employment and related job placement metrics. Today, more and more organizations like YouthBuild Philly are also prioritizing strategies that promote economic stability and mobility for workers, including supportive management and clear pathways to advancement. As the business cases in this profile demonstrate, service providers and business partners can work together to improve workers’ experiences in ways that can enhance retention and improve a business’s bottom line. YouthBuild Philly’s approach also illustrates the importance of naming and addressing structural inequality and racial bias as part of this work to foster meaningful systems change for young people and all front-line retail workers.

Acknowledgments

We appreciate all the Philadelphia Reimagine Retail partners whose work informed this publication: Philadelphia Youth Network, the Job Opportunity Investment Network, JEVS Human Services, District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund, and YouthBuild Philadelphia. This profile draws on several years of work with these partners and multiple site visits, and we appreciate the current and former staff who contributed. We are especially thankful to Robin Walker and Scott Emerick at YouthBuild Philadelphia for their thoughtful review and feedback. We are also

grateful to Dr. Joanna Shoffner Scott for introducing us to her Racial Equity Impact Analysis framework, adapted from Race Matters, which has informed development of this publication. We thank our partners in the Retail Opportunity Network Race and Gender Equity Working Group who have helped shed light on racial disparities in retail and encouraged us to center and address these disparities in our work. Finally, we thank our colleagues Ranita Jain and Amy Blair, whose research across many years has greatly informed this publication.



With support from the Walmart Foundation, in 2016 the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program launched Reimagine Retail ([aspn/reimagineretail](https://www.aspn/reimagineretail)), a project that explores ways to enhance stability and improve mobility for the retail workforce. Working closely with partners in six regions — Chicago, San Diego, the San Francisco Bay Area, Phoenix, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh — we have tested strategies and captured learning about approaches they are using to support retail worker job quality and advancement. In Philadelphia, we partner with [Philadelphia Youth Network](#),²⁸ the [Job Opportunity Investment Network](#),²⁹ [JEVS Human Services](#),³⁰ [YouthBuild Philadelphia](#),³¹ Charter School, and [District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund](#). This is the fourth in a series of profiles by the Workforce Strategies Initiative spotlighting promising practices from across the Reimagine Retail Network. To learn more about Reimagine Retail, visit [aspn/reimagineretail](https://www.aspn/reimagineretail). To learn more about the Workforce Strategies Initiative, visit [aspn/wsi](https://www.aspn/wsi). Stay up to date with the Workforce Strategies Initiative by joining our mailing list ([aspn/eopmail](https://www.aspn/eopmail)) and following us on social media ([aspn/eopsocial](https://www.aspn/eopsocial)).

This report was made possible through funding by the Walmart Foundation. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations presented in this report are those of the Aspen Institute alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Walmart Foundation.

²⁸ <https://www.pyninc.org/>

²⁹ <https://www.unitedforimpact.org/our-cause/signature-programs/job-opportunities-investment-network-join/>

³⁰ <https://www.jevshumanservices.org/>

³¹ <https://youthbuildphilly.org/>