

The SEED Social Enterprise Program: Final Evaluation Report

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PREPARED FOR

The SEED

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Introduction

Youth who are not in employment, education or training (NEET youth) make up approximately 12% of the Ontario youth population between the ages of 16 and 29¹. NEET youth face systemic barriers to employment and training programs, including lack of appropriate work experience, skills, or education; lack of suitable, local employment opportunities; and life circumstances such as mental or physical health challenges, precarious living arrangements, and lack of transportation². NEET youth are at risk for long-term social and economic struggles, are more likely to have poorer physical and mental health and lower levels of life-satisfaction than non-NEET youth³. Reducing the number of youth not in employment, education or training is one of the United Nation's Sustainable Development targets⁴.

Research has shown that the systemic barriers NEET youth face can be reduced or eliminated through targeted interventions that include employment and training programs⁵. However, finding employment is only a part of the picture; many NEET youth have intersecting barriers and report needing support with transportation, housing, mental and physical health, and financial support for education in order to break the cycle of unemployment⁶. Social enterprises, which operate on socially driven principles, are therefore particularly suited to address the barriers that NEET youth face⁷.

In response to the unmet needs of Guelph's NEET youth population, a model for youth employment programming through The SEED's social enterprises was developed in collaboration with Everdale Farm, The County of Wellington - Ontario Works, 2nd Chance Employment and Lutherwood ("the Collective"). Funding provided by Ontario Trillium Foundation's Local Poverty Reduction Fund was used to scale up three social enterprises and launch two new social enterprises and develop the Good Food Work Experience for NEET youth.

This model has evolved considerably over the course of the three-year LPRF grant, and more detail on this evolution is provided later in this report. The current iteration of the model is called The Good Food Work Experience. It is supported by "the Collective". Youth ages 18-29 who face barriers to employment are referred to the program where they first participate in an unpaid, three-week experiential learning program. During the three weeks youth have the opportunity to participate at the SEED's social enterprises, Guelph Youth Farm and Everdale Farm. The SEED also coordinates workshops and presentations for youth. After the three-week component, youth are offered an employment contract which is generally funded by the associated referral partner, and is based on their interests (e.g., the employment location(s) that

¹ Blueprint Analytics, Design & Evaluation. (nd). Towards a Better Understanding of NEET Youth in Ontario

² Ibid

³ Davidson & Arim. (2019). A Profile of Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) In Canada

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Kutzyruba et al. (2019). Needs of NEET Youth: Pathways to positive outcomes.

⁶ Blueprint Analytics, Design & Evaluation. (nd). Towards a Better Understanding of NEET Youth in Ontario

⁷ Thorpe. (2017). The Role of Entrepreneurship In Ending Poverty and Homelessness.

they liked best) and capacity. Associated referral partners, SEED staff, and Everdale Farm staff provide ongoing support to youth throughout their time in the program.

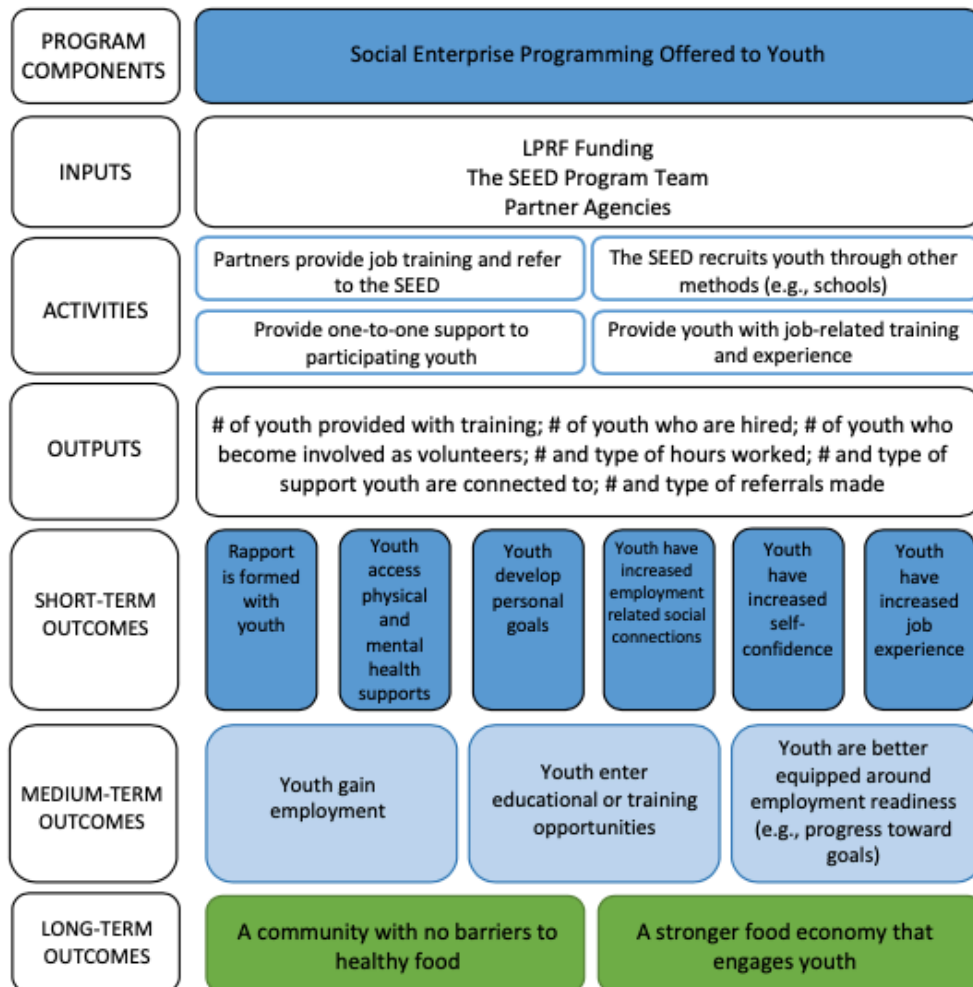
This final evaluation report presents key learnings from the 3-year process and impact evaluation of the Social Enterprise Program for youth, based on data from social enterprise staff, referring partners, and youth who participated in the Good Food Work Experience.

Goals of The SEED’s Social Enterprise Program

There are three overarching goals of the Social Enterprise Program:

1. Better equip individuals to address the root causes of food insecurity
2. Reduce or eliminate the barriers preventing NEET youth from joining the work force or advancing their education
3. create meaningful employment opportunities and reduce poverty

The steps taken to achieve these goals are broken down in the program logic model. The SEED’s Social Enterprise Program has a larger logic model that includes plans for scaling up (see Appendix A), but as the main focus of this evaluation report is on youth outcomes, the slice of the logic model focusing on youth outcomes is presented here.



Evaluation Framework

Key evaluation questions

- Who are the participating youth? Is the project reaching NEET youth? What are the obstacles they face in seeking employment, education or training?
- What are the experiences of participating youth?
- What lessons have been learned? How are the complex challenges that participating youth are facing managed?
- How might this model be taken to scale? How sustainable is the social enterprise model?

Methods

Youth completed a pre-test survey at beginning of the experiential learning component and a post-test at the end. Surveys were completed as in-person interviews when youth were on site for the program. The surveys gathered data on baseline employment and educational status, barriers faced in regard to employment, education or training, ability to meet basic needs, health and community belonging, social connections and feelings of support, and confidence and goal setting related to future employment. The post-test repeated the baseline measures and included additional items such as how the program helped them to overcome barriers and asked them to rate the support they received from program supervisors.

Some also participated in a focus group at the end of the experiential learning component. Youth who were hired for an employment contract completed a post-test survey at the end of their contract and also participated in an interview. Staff and partners participated in interviews at the end of each reporting year. In year 3, an open-ended exit survey was implemented in an attempt to gather feedback on the COVID-related challenges that prevented the youth from being able to fulfill their employment contracts.

Youth co-researchers worked with Taylor Newberry Consulting to assist with evaluation tool design (providing feedback for tool development) and administer surveys/interviews. Co-researchers also acted as a liaison between the program and the evaluators, communicating program challenges and changes. Co-researchers were hired officially as SEED Program Assistants and, although they did not need to be participants in the program, they needed to have some connection to it (e.g., the year 1 SEED co researcher was hired to coordinate the Community Food Markets, as well as liaise with the evaluation team). The positions were funded by the Community Health Centre, as part of the project evaluation budget.

Data Analysis

Data collected over the 3-year evaluation was combined wherever possible. Survey data, which was very limited in each of the 3 years, was not able to be analyzed on a year-by-year basis; however, some aspects of the survey were the same across the years which enabled the data sets to be combined for an aggregate analysis of many survey questions. Qualitative (partner

interview, youth focus group) data from all 3 years was also analyzed together to provide a comprehensive view of program impacts and processes.

Table 3.

Tools	Sample Size (cumulative)
Qualitative	
Staff and partner interviews	n = 27 ⁸
Post-training youth focus groups	n = 4
End of Employment youth interviews	n = 7
Exit surveys (open-ended)	n = 3
Quantitative	
Pre-training survey responses	n = 23
Post-training survey responses	n = 12

Note: Unable to conduct repeated measures statistical analyses due to small sample. Statistics presented on the basis of this data is descriptive in nature.

Program Implementation

During the experiential learning component of the program, youth spend time in the SEED’s social enterprises and at partnering farms (see Table 1). They typically spent one half-day per week at each location for 3 weeks, learning about what kind of work is involved at each location and discovering what kind of work could be a good fit for them, as well as gaining comfort with the various atmospheres and supervisors. At all of these sites youth generally work alongside volunteers and are supported by staff members.

The exposure to various aspects of the food sector through the experiential learning component enables youth to experience different jobs and learn more about their personal interests. Following the experiential learning component, youth could be hired into a placement at any one of these locations based on their interests. The work placements can be considered a next level of the program for youth who complete the learning component. The work placements are generally

⁸ 13 unique staff/partners were interviewed, and interviews with some staff/partners were repeated annually for a total of 27 interviews.

subsidized by OW and Lutherwood and length of employment contract varies based on the funding available and the participant's capacity and goals.

Table 1.

Location	Activities
Everdale Farm (Hillsburgh, ON)	Youth are driven to the farm where they participate in a variety of farm related activities depending on the time of year, including planting, weeding, or harvesting.
Guelph Youth Farm (Guelph, ON)	Youth are trained to grow vegetables from seeding to transplanting to harvesting. Youth are also involved in the planning of what to plant based on what can be sold at the market.
Upcycle Kitchen Café (Guelph Community Health Centre, Guelph, ON)	Youth prepare and serve meals to customers, learn safe food handling techniques, customer service, and other kitchen skills. Launched in late 2019.
Community Food Markets (Guelph, ON)	Youth are involved in set up each week, sales, and interacting with community members (customer service).
SEED Warehouse (Guelph, ON)	Youth work on the pack line preparing food shipments to be sent to partners. They are also responsible for helping with set up and tear down at the start and end of each shift and with other tasks such as shipments and sorting as they come up. During COVID, warehouse positions involved preparing extremely large quantities of emergency food deliveries.

Changes to Implementation

The program design was changed from year 1 to year 2, and from year 2 to year 3 as new learnings from the evaluation were incorporated.

Changes in Year 2

In year 1, youth were placed directly into paid work placements after being referred by program partners. In year 2, the experiential learning component was added in order to give youth the opportunity to explore a variety of food-related employment settings. The experiential learning component took the form of a 3-week group session where youth visited the possible work locations and listened to presentations offered by The SEED. There was the addition of optional 10-week drop-in sessions which were a flexible alternative for youth who wanted to further explore opportunities at the locations that they liked best and determine if they were the right fit for employment.

During year 2, the 3-week experiential learning component was changed from a 4-day workweek to a 5-day workweek to help maintain momentum and attendance. Also, by the end of year 2, it became clear through early evaluation findings that many youth seeking employment were unable to commit to 10 weeks of unpaid participation; thus, the drop-in sessions were discontinued. Discontinuing the 10-week component brought greater clarity to the program, with youth being aware that they will be employed as soon as possible after the 3-week component, provided that they attend enough training sessions during those three weeks.

Another program design change made in year 2 was to employ fewer youth each year and reallocate those resources to longer periods of employment for the youth who were hired.

Changes in Year 3

Year 3 of the program involved the implementation of a Work Standards Agreement. The Work Standards Agreement was implemented in an effort to bring clarity to youth and supervisors, specifically around roles and expectations. Staff felt that the use of these agreements was beneficial in making the work placements in year 3 function more like employment contracts and less like participation in a program.

Finally, COVID-19 forced pivots to programming in Year 3. When COVID-19 hit Ontario in March, 2020 and the province entered a lockdown, initially, all work placements were paused. Some youth from the February 2020 training had started their placements but stopped by March 16th, 2020. Others were never able to get started. Some placements started up again in August 2020, and two youth from the Feb 2020 cohort were able to complete their employment contracts later in the year. The rest of the youth from the February 2020 cohort were unable to take on employment either due to safety concerns around COVID-19 (and the anxiety related to safety), or due to a lack of placements with not all social enterprises back up and running.

The warehouse and kitchen placements were the first to be reinstated, although the specifics of the positions changed: The kitchen placement shifted from The SEED's Upcycle Kitchen to the preparation of meals for the Emergency Food Home Delivery program, and the warehouse placement shifted to packing groceries and these meals into nutritious food boxes for delivery to food insecure community members. Accordingly, the intensity of the workload increased with the Emergency Food Home Delivery program.

"...having to rush to get the meals done, having to get them picked up at a certain time, because over the last three months that I have been there, we've made over 4,138 meals--" (youth with employment placement)

Some program partners believed that the program pivots caused the loss of engagement and follow-through among some youth. Recruiting new candidates for the program was also paused – referring partners were no longer meeting for in-person information sessions with clients, and there was no longer capacity within The SEED to safely organize or run the experiential learning component for new cohorts.

Although year 3 of the program was heavily impacted by COVID-19, “the Collective” has begun to plan for the future sustainability of the program. Plans are in the works for rolling, case-by-

case enrollment of youth for 2021, and one new youth has already been given a work placement under this new structure.

Evaluation Findings

Participant Demographics and Baselines

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 29 (with an average age of 22) at the start of their participation in the experiential learning component. Program participants (over all 3 years) identified as 50% male and 50% female.

At baseline, 76% of participants could be classified as NEET; 2 participants were currently enrolled in an alternative high school program but not working, 1 was enrolled in the alternative high school program and was working part time, 1 was working part time but not enrolled in any education or training, and 1 was enrolled in another educational or training program outside of The SEED. 50% had graduated from high school, 20% were not currently enrolled in high school but did not graduate, and 15% had completed their GEDs⁹.

Barriers to Education and Employment

Before completing the experiential learning component of the program, 70% of participants faced barriers in their lives that prevented them from enrolling in or finishing an educational or training program, getting a job, or keeping a job (see Table 4 for percent reporting barriers to each).

Table 4.

Percent of youth who agreed or strongly agreed that there are things that they dealt with in their life that prevented them from...	
55% (n = 11/20)	getting a job
42% (n = 8/19)	keeping a job
37% (n = 7/19)	enrolling in an education or training program
32% (n = 6/19)	finishing an education or training program

When asked about the things in their lives that have acted as barriers to employment or education/training, youth, and the program staff and partners who worked closely with them, shared the following:

⁹ Out of 21 participants who provided this information in the pre-training survey. Youth who were currently enrolled in high school were completing the program for high school credit through the Give Yourself Credit alternative school for youth struggling in the traditional school system.

- Financial difficulties / the status of their student loan
- Mental or physical health issues
- Lack of motivation
- Perception that they had limited skills / lack of confidence that they could succeed at new things
- Precarious housing (unsafe, unaffordable, not local)
- Transportation
- Language barrier
- Lack of experience / empty resume
- Lack of family support
- Working through the legal system (e.g., scheduling around court dates)

The Good Food Work Experience and the partners who make the program happen strive to reduce (or eliminate) these barriers through flexibility, understanding, social support, as well as other practical supports such as providing transportation where possible and paying a living wage.

Workplace and Training Atmosphere

Over all 3 years of program implementation, interviewed youth described the atmosphere in very positive terms. The atmosphere was more than an added bonus to the program – it was integral to the success of the program. Youth need the right kind of workplace atmosphere in order to overcome many of the barriers they traditionally face in entering and retaining employment. Common adjectives used by youth to describe the experiential learning component and work placements include:

- Welcoming
- Positive
- Friendly
- Supportive
- Engaging

The following interview excerpts illustrate how the atmosphere looked and felt to youth, program partners, and staff. One youth described how their ideas were always welcomed and their perspective always heard:

“most places of employment, you’re expected to do your job, follow orders, and not really deviate from that at all. With the SEED, it’s very much an environment of you’re welcome to bring ideas forward, to make suggestions, to comment, to have your perspective heard, and it definitely feels like they take the perspectives of everyone into consideration.” (youth with employment placement)

A SEED staff member reflected on a visit to one of the work locations where they witnessed how youth were building their social capital while learning together as a group of like-minded

individuals. The friendly, social nature of the program led to its ability to engage youth in learning and working:

*"when I went out to the **Everdale farm** in Hillsburgh and the group of young people that were there working together. I mean, I was quite taken by the comradery and friendship, how they were working together and learning at the same time, all very hands-on... So they can build the social scene, social capital, the social aspects of who you're working with and these are all young people that are in similar situations or have similar interests that you do altogether."*
(Program partner)

Even program partners witness how engaging the program is, acknowledging that full engagement in working and learning is a notable accomplishment within the population of NEET youth.

"It was really neat to see them in participating. I am thinking specifically at the farm or in the kitchen, and learning those skills and then seeing them actually put those skills into action... I would say full engagement was quite exciting from a teacher standpoint, because you sometimes don't see that all the time, particularly with our population that we work with."
(Program partner)

Program participants and attendance rates

In the first year of the Good Food Work Experience (2018), the 3-week cohort model had not yet been adopted. Youth were hired directly into placements at the Community Food Markets and Guelph Youth Farm with no experiential learning component beforehand (12 youth were given placements in Year 1). In the second and third years of the program, the experiential learning component was offered to 19 youth (over 3 cohorts). Of those, 17 completed the program, and 11 accepted employment contracts. Due to COVID-19, 3 of those hired after the February 2020 program were unable to maintain their employment contracts; however, the youth from the last experiential learning session are still in touch with The SEED and awaiting the opportunity for employment when it is safe to do so. So far, 1 new youth has been able to start a placement in September 2020 as opportunities began to open up again.

Table 2.

Year	Cohort	# of participants enrolled in program	# of participants completed program	# of participants hired
2018	--	--	--	12
2019	Cohort 1 (Jun)	7	6	2
2019	Cohort 2 (Oct)	3	3	3
2020	Cohort 3 (Feb)	9	8	5*

*Note: only 2 of the 5 hired were able to fulfil contracts due to COVID-19

**Note: Sept 2020 hire was enrolled through a rolling intake model with one-on-one training as a COVID response.

Attendance was calculated for each cohort individually based on the number of days participants attended the experiential learning program divided by the number of program days in each cohort. For the following graph, late arrivals (excused or not) were counted as days in attendance. Attendance rates consistently improved over the 3 cohorts: Cohort 1 saw a 56% attendance rate; Cohort 2, 81%; and Cohort 3, 83%. The rate of planned or excused absences also dropped by about half from the first cohort. Late arrivals, however, increased from the first cohort and stayed higher than in the first cohort.

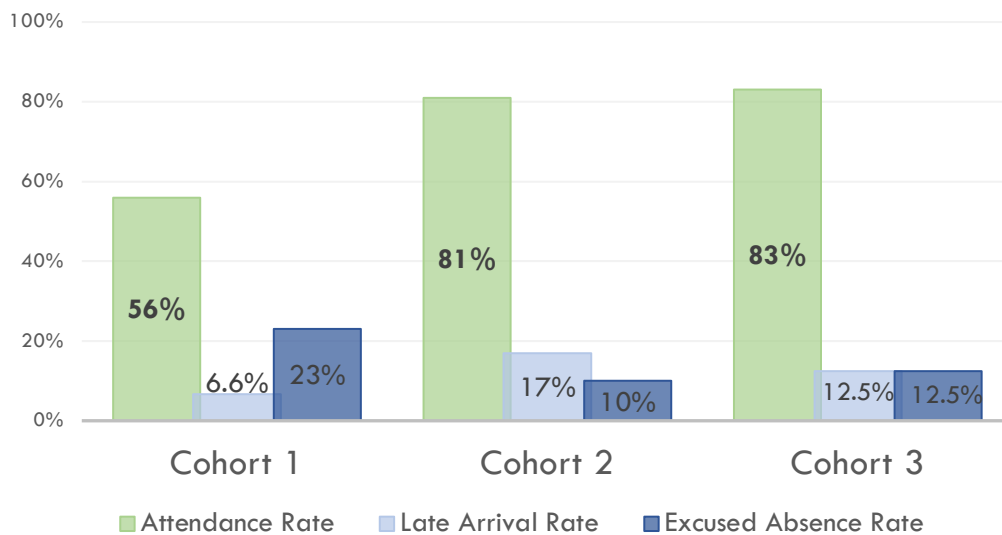


Figure 1. Program attendance, late arrive, and excused absence rates

The fact that late arrivals and excused absences were common for youth highlights the importance of flexibility in the program expectations. This flexibility has become a standard practice for which the Good Food Work Experience is known and appreciated by youth and program partners alike. The program takes into consideration the barriers that these youth are known to face and accommodates their needs to reduce these barriers. This practice translates into communicating solutions for unexcused lateness and absences and, once the youth enter work placements, a flexible or adapted schedule that works around individual barriers each youth may face.

“If they’re dealing with some mental health challenges, dealing with some physical health challenges, anything like that, there is a level of understanding there that yes, this person is going to encounter that type of thing... so as long as you’re communicating with us why it is that you’re not able to make it one day, then it’s fine. Creating opportunities for youth who need that flexibility is really important.” (The SEED staff)

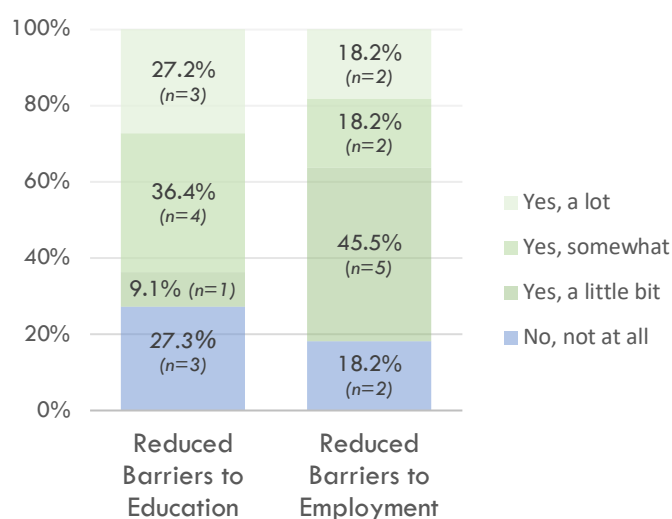
Key outcomes and program impacts

The evaluation has assessed the impacts of the program on several key outcome areas defined in the program logic model (Appendix A), as well as the larger, overarching goals of the program such as reducing barriers that prevent NEET youth from joining the work force or advancing their education.

Reduction of Barriers for NEET youth

After the experiential learning component, youth were asked if the program (and any support offered along with the program) helped them to deal with any of the barriers in their lives that were preventing them from enrolling in or finishing an education or training program or getting or keeping a job. A total of **73% reported that the program helped reduce barriers they were facing in enrolling in or finishing an education or training program¹⁰**, and **82% reported that the program helped reduce barriers to getting or keeping a job¹¹**.

Barriers were reduced through many avenues and approaches, but the following example highlights how program staff took the time to really understand what the youth's biggest barrier was and to support that youth's process both practically and emotionally. When one youth on an employment placement expressed that finishing high school was a barrier she'd like to overcome, program staff were supportive of the youth's suggestion to extend the contract with extra volunteer hours in order to earn a high school credit.



“Finishing high school was definitely a big barrier that I was facing, as I am not good at online learning so the fact that they truly wanted to help me attain that and did everything they could to set up the co-op helped me in such a great way.” (youth with employment placement)

The ways in which barriers were reduced can be explained by the many short-term outcomes achieved, such as providing youth with social supports through rapport- and relationship-building, providing them with access to employment related social connections, connecting them to physical and mental health supports in the community, and helping them develop personal goals and build confidence in their ability to achieve their goals.

¹⁰ n = 8 out of 11 participants who responded

¹¹ n = 9 out of 11 participants who responded

Rapport and Social Support

Forming rapport between youth and supervisors is a key outcome that sets the stage for the program to succeed in other areas. The quality of the relationship that supervisors form with the youth participating in the program dictates the social atmosphere, the general support youth feel toward their success in the program and beyond, and the willingness for youth to open up and seek or accept support for the unique barriers they face.

In interviews, youth and staff alike were very likely to share stories of the rapport they had with each other. Youth spoke of feeling comfortable talking to their supervisor(s) about personal issues, feeling supported, and having a connection or a friendship with their supervisor(s).

“The coordinators aren’t faculty, they’re friends.” (Experiential learning program participant)

Staff who supervised the youth during their placements reiterated these ideas, and explained that the informal conversations, like *“taking a minute to say, ‘how are you doing?’”* can be enough to make the youth feel welcome, wanted and willing to talk about things that are going on in their life (quote from SEED staff).

“It feels like a trusting relationship, I feel like she could come to me and if she had something come up or something she needed to talk about, that I feel like she could do that.” (SEED Staff)

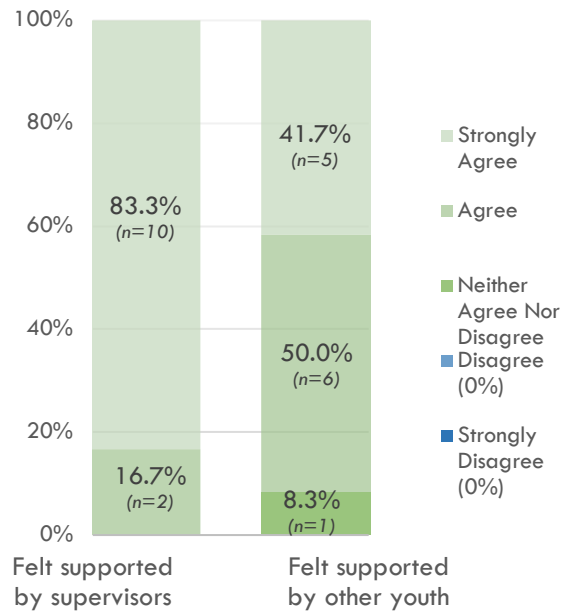
As was evidenced in the anecdotes shared by participants and staff, an important part of rapport is feeling supported by supervisors. Through the survey data it is possible to compare how supported youth felt before and after participating in the experiential learning component¹²: there was a **20% increase in youth feeling they had someone to depend on if they needed it** (80% agreed at pre-test, 100% agreed at post-test).

¹² Only a visual comparison (not statistical significance comparison) is possible due to the small, unmatched sample and unequal cells.

Furthermore, **100% of youth who completed the experiential learning program said that they felt supported by supervisors; 92% felt supported by other youth in the program**¹³.

Beyond the experiential learning program, it was important to staff to ensure that youth felt supported throughout their employment contracts as well.

“I would say I feel fairly supported. All of the core staff members that I’ve interacted with seem to have been doing their best to make sure that everyone working for them is comfortable and in a position where they feel they can keep going. It was a big thing for Maddie... to make sure that The SEED itself would be a good fit for me, not just that I would be a good fit for working at The SEED.” (youth with employment placement)



Increased Employment Related Social Connections

Report building and social support are avenues through which youth expand their social contacts and learn about additional supports and services in their community. Of the youth who participated in the experiential learning component, **83.4% gained new social contacts** through the program, and **90% learned about supports and services in their community**¹⁴.

¹³ Asked at post-test only; calculated by combining agree and strongly agree responses; n=12

¹⁴ Asked at post-test only; calculated by combining agree and strongly agree responses; n=12

Youth were asked before and after the experiential learning component about the support they felt they had for employment opportunities specifically; more youth felt that they had these various kinds of support after the training program than before participating. There was a **42% increase in youth agreeing that they had someone in their community whom they could ask about employment opportunities**, and a **40% increase in youth agreeing that they had someone to observe directly to discover new work-related interests**¹⁵ (see Table 5).

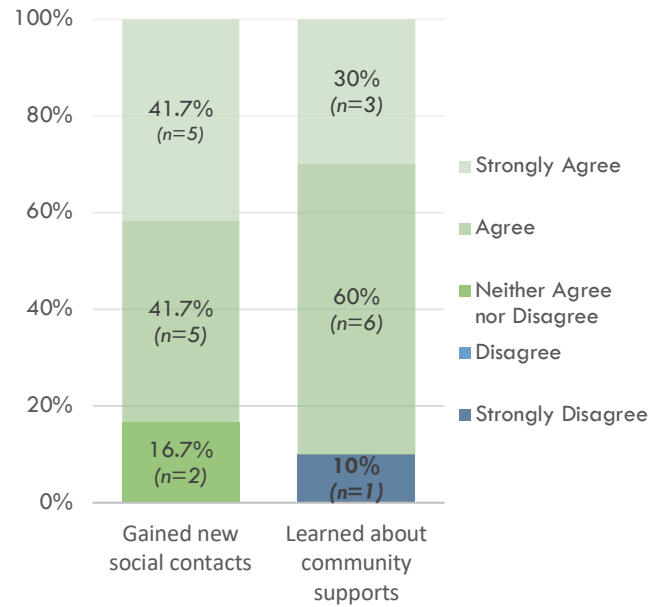


Table 5.

	% agree at pre-test	% agree at post-test
There are people in my community that I would feel comfortable contacting to ask about employment opportunities	50%	92%
*There is someone for me to observe directly to find out about the kind of work I might like to do	60%	100%

Note: % agreement calculated by summing agree and strongly responses, on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Note: final item (*) has been reworded and reverse scored for clarity; was originally worded, “there is no one for me to observe directly...”

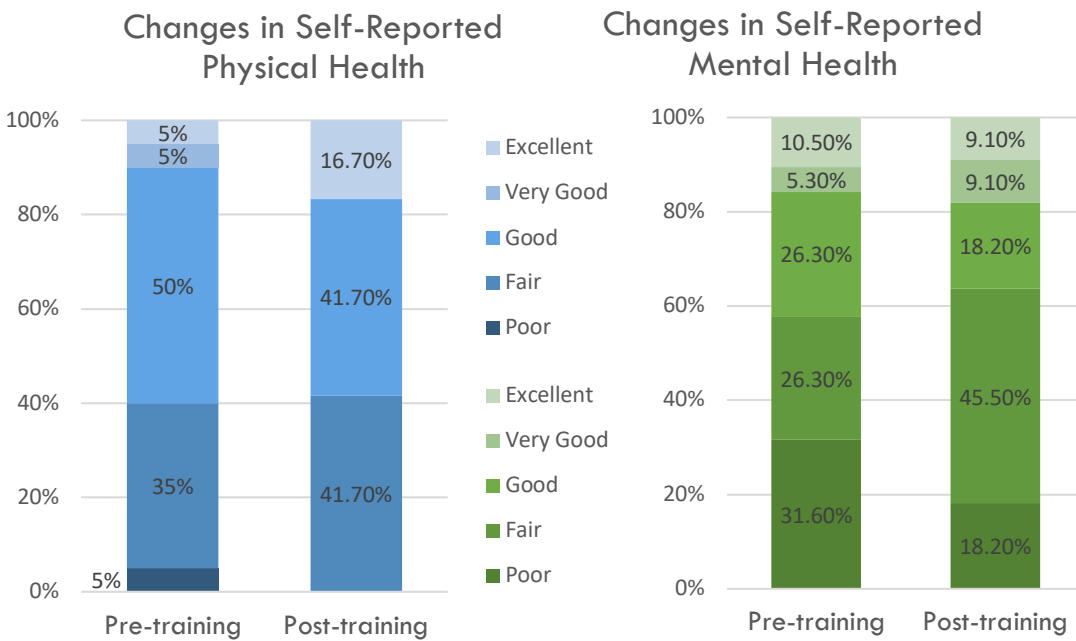
Physical and Mental Health Supports

Among the common barriers these youth face are mental and physical health concerns. Accordingly, the program intended to impact physical and mental health through connecting youth with supports in the community and through the positive and supportive work environment. Although the evaluation set out to track the number of referrals and connections to mental and physical health supports in the community, due to the informal nature of how these connections were made and the large network of individuals interacting with youth and providing connections,

¹⁵ Only a visual comparison (not statistical significance comparison) is possible due to the small, unmatched sample and unequal cells

the data was unable to be tracked quantitatively. However, participants shared many stories of how their mental (and to a lesser extent, physical) health improved **because of their experience with the program.**

From the quantitative data that is available on impacts to physical and mental health, participants' self-reported physical health improved by 4.4%¹⁶ from before to after the experiential learning component. Self-reported mental health also improved, although within a smaller margin (1.6%¹⁷). Although the statistical significance of the change cannot be calculated, the following graph shows some notable changes in responses over time: the percentage of youth who reported excellent physical health tripled after the training (increased from 5% to 16.7%), and the percentage of youth who reported poor mental health nearly halved (decreased from 31.6% to 18.2%)¹⁸.



In interviews, youth shared some of the ways in which the Good Food Work Experience supported and impacted their mental and physical health.

“Making new friends and stuff, having that friendship, being able to talk to somebody, it relieves some of the stress” (youth with employment placement)

¹⁶ Physical health: Pre-test mean = 1.7, Post-test mean = 1.92, mean difference = 0.22 on a 5-point scale

¹⁷ Mental health: Pre-test mean = 1.37, Post-test mean = 1.45, mean difference = .08 on a 5-point scale

¹⁸ Changes over time need to be interpreted with caution as the pre- and post- sample sizes are unequal unmatched by participant; we are comparing the average health ratings of all youth at pre-test with the average ratings of all youth at post-test which introduced risk of statistical error, or unknown individual variance.

*“My mental health has definitely improved since I started working here, especially after several months of just nothing it’s nice to have some **structure and purpose in my days.**”*
(youth with employment placement)

*“For mental health, it was good... **Working outside in nature**, and socializing with mature people. ...and physical health. Bending over, lifting 40 pounds of vegetables regularly sometimes.”* (youth with employment placement)

A staff member from The SEED shared a story that illustrates one of the program’s strategies for supporting youth through mental health challenges that would otherwise be a barrier to employment:

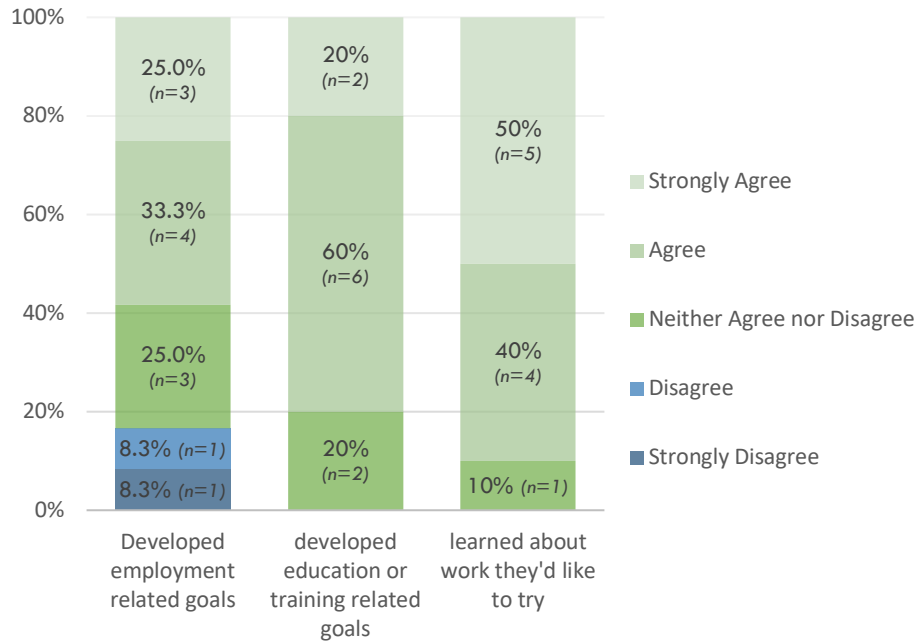
“He might be gone for three weeks because he’s having a rough time, mental health issues, et cetera. But when he comes in, he’s welcome, he does what he can then he stays as often as he can. It’s just a connection for him that allows him to have bad days but gives them somewhere to go on a good day.” (The SEED staff)

Although the Good Food Work Experience program is not a mental health service at its core, the staff from The SEED and Everdale who held supervisory roles completed a two-day mental health first aid course in Year 2 which made them feel more prepared to support the mental health needs of youth that might come up during their placements. The preparedness and openness to working with youths’ mental health challenges, rather than allowing these challenges to become barriers, illustrates how the program was able to contribute to improvements in self-reported mental health for participants.

Development of personal and employment goals

Early data suggested that youth did not typically start to develop long-term personal goals as a result of the 3-week experiential learning program, and it was common for youth to mention being focused on the present, with any goal setting being short-term and focused on meeting basic needs (e.g., *“Usually my only short-term goal is making sure I’ve got the money for rent.”* -- youth from experiential learning component). However, when survey data had been amalgamated across the 3 years of the program, it became clear that **employment** related goals were indeed being formed.

- **58.3%** started thinking about education or training related goals
- **80%** started thinking about employment related goals
- **90%** learned about work that they might like to try



By the end of employment contracts, youth were beginning to be able to put words and shape to their goals. In interviews, youth shared goals that ranged from short-term and specific to long-term with awareness of the steps involved in reaching their goals:

“I want to get my forklift license, but first I’m probably going to do that Lutherwood thing and get my Smart Serve through them.” (youth with employment placement)

“Since I’ve been at the SEED for a long period of time, I’m honestly thinking about maybe going into the culinary programs or something like that.” (youth with employment placement)

Increased Confidence

Goal setting and confidence go hand-in-hand. In order to set goals, youth need to be able to feel confident that they can be achieved. Confidence was assessed qualitatively, through interviews and focus groups conducted with youth after participating in the experiential learning component and employment placements. In interviews, youth experiencing increased confidence was one of the most commonly referred to benefits of the program (along with references to improvements in mental health).

*“I feel like I am more comfortable in a workplace in general because at my last places of work I have felt like I didn’t really belong or know what I was doing and felt kind of lost. But at The Seed, I was given proper training and am encouraged to ask questions when I’m not sure what to do. **I feel more confident about myself and my abilities...**”* (youth with employment placement)

*“I feel like when we’re here, filling up the truck, there’s a lot more people helping you and you’re not alone. ...there’s a lot less fortunate people who don’t really have a lot, but now it’s giving us the chance to give back to the community, it feels so much better... **You get a***

lot of confidence from this, that you can-- even if this doesn't pan out... you can still move forward and continue to get better.” (youth in experiential learning component)

Increased Job Experience

One of the most direct outcomes of the Good Food Work Experience is providing youth with increased job experience. At the end of the first 3 years of the program, 20 youth have been employed by The SEED (warehouse, upcycle kitchen, market), Everdale Farm, and Guelph Youth Farm. One of the benefits of work experience with the program is that youth feel they have learned, developed, and grown as employees and they are therefore confident in asking for a reference for future job applications. One youth also believed that the fact that their work experience was geared toward helping the local community would be attractive to future employers.

“I definitely think I could rely on the SEED staff for a reference in the future, and I probably will since it is the most hands-on workplace I have been in and I think it would look good on my applications for future jobs.” (youth with employment contract)

“Because of the community involvement, because of what we’ve been trying to do with the market, I feel there’s definitely a lot of approach for telling people that the work that I’ve done has been specifically geared to help the local community. I’m pretty sure most employers would appreciate that sort of thing.” (youth with employment contract)

This, and the other short-term outcomes, directly feeds into the **medium-term outcome** of youth feeling better equipped around employment readiness.

Improved Employment Readiness

Youth cited specific skills they had learned throughout the experiential learning component and their employment placements which they felt better prepared them for future employment:

- Communication skills
- Confidence
- Time management
- Industry-specific skills (i.e., cooking, gardening) and certificates (e.g., food safety)
- Social/people skills, teamwork
- Self- and emotional-regulation, patience

Although the 10-week drop-in session option was discontinued from the program after year 1, one youth spoke about how they hoped that the experience, training, and certificates they could acquire during the 10 weeks would open many more doors for their future employment:

“That’s why we’re continuing the 10 weeks... We’re doing all 30 days of it. That’s the goal... We’re not looking to get one certificate or two; we’re looking to get as many as we possibly can so that we’re not sticking ourselves with that door and that option, we’ve got five or six in front of us and if that one closes, you’ve still got the other four or five there open, kind of thing.” (youth in experiential learning component)

Beyond skill-building and adding to a resume, work experience in the program let youth discover their interests and their capabilities, opening doors to future work that they may not have considered for themselves before.

“It’s definitely helped out with kind of figuring out what I enjoy and what I don’t... [it’s] giving me an idea of what I’m capable of, essentially.” (youth with employment placement)

NEET Youth Gain Employment, Educational or Training Opportunities

The medium-term outcome of youth gaining employment, educational or training opportunities is closely aligned with the overarching program goals. The program sought to reduce or eliminate the barriers preventing NEET youth from joining the workforce or advancing their education, ultimately leading to the increased employment of NEET youth.

Follow-up interviews with youth were intended to assess the rate of employment or engagement in education/training among those who had completed the program. However, challenges such as losing touch with past participants and the pandemic’s negative impact to the job market and economy made this indicator impractical. Despite the lack of quantitative or long-term follow-up data on youth who completed the program, one youth who found employment in another setting shared in an interview that the Good Food Work Experience directly led to their next job:

“Finished food safety training. Helped me get the job I have now... working with the Seed led me to the job I have now.” (youth with employment placement)

A staff member from The SEED also shared a story about how the program was able to support a youth (who was not enrolled in the program officially) to find a job.

“There’s a young man... he was just struggling at home. The person who runs the kitchen...brought him in and encouraged him to come and help out 'cause he's just feeling kind of lost and just couldn't get the motivation to do anything. He wasn't working, he wasn't doing anything. He came into the kitchen and he helped out... And because he got out of the house, he got going within a few weeks of volunteering, he got himself a job, which is great.”
(The SEED staff)

Scaling Social Enterprises

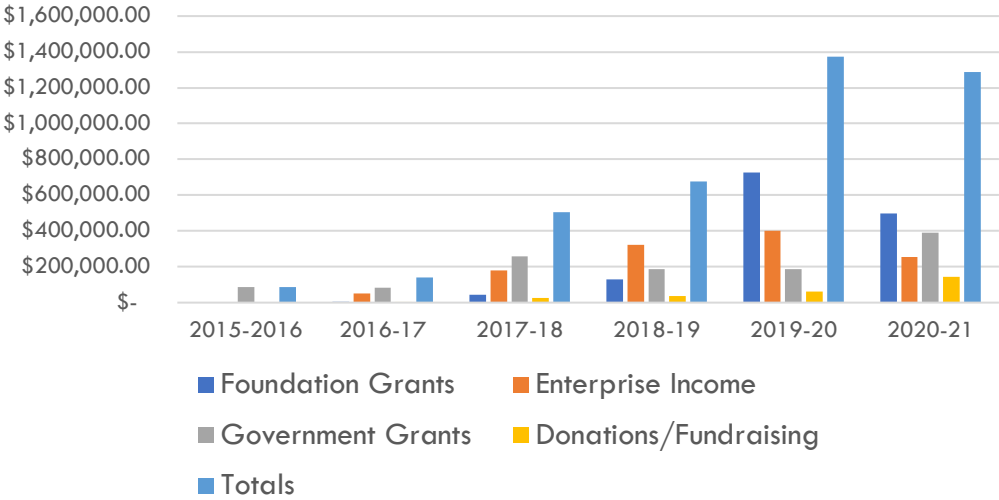
The social enterprises that make up The Seed have changed in many ways over the past three years. In the months since the beginning of the COVID crisis, The SEED has focused its efforts on two social enterprise models that are most likely to become self-sustaining and long-lasting: *Good Food Distribution* and *Groceries from The SEED*. Elements of other social enterprise efforts, including the Garden Fresh Box, the Community Food Markets, and the Upcycle Kitchen are embedded in the *Groceries from The SEED* enterprise. The Good Food Project, in partnership with Everdale, has also grown to have a greater impact on The SEED’s work, with tens of thousands of pounds grown and harvested for distribution through The SEED’s enterprises and programs.

The Good Food Work Experience project is embedded in the SEED’s social enterprise work. It uses these enterprises as platforms to create work opportunities for NEET youth that would not

otherwise exist, and it also helps these enterprises fulfill their social purposes. Moving forward, the success of The Seed’s social enterprise work, particularly through the Good Food Project partnership, means that youth will continue to have the rural, outdoor, revitalising experience of working on an organic farm.

The SEED’s social enterprises have been and will continue to be supported by enterprise revenues, project partners, foundation funding and grants, and volunteers. Small and large-scale partnerships with local donors range from farmers donating and selling food to large corporations donating warehouse space and refrigerated trucks. The SEED has also partnered with Second Harvest, Canada’s largest food reclamation agency, for food-based donations. Volunteers have donated 8600 hours over the past 7 months (the equivalent of 5 full-time staff working for a year), helping to prepare meals, pack boxes, and deliver food to homes. Donations from private donors have been increasing as well (increased 70% from year 1 to year 2, and 137% from year 2 to year 3). The following graph illustrates the long-term year-over-year increases in revenues for The SEED’s social enterprises. The 2020-2021 year was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is expected that the trends will continue upward in the following years.

SEED Revenue Sources: 2015-16 to 2020-21



The sliding scale model, utilized and evaluated with the Community Food Market enterprise, has been applied to *Groceries From The SEED* in order to make it attractive to people from all socioeconomic backgrounds. *Groceries from The SEED* is in a pilot phase to ensure that it will be sustainable to offset operational costs, including NEET youth employment.

Refocusing on the two main enterprises will also improve the sustainability of marketing efforts. Other enterprises that had become less attractive to community members required more marketing investments than they were seemingly worth. For example, the Garden Fresh Box enterprise appeared to be less attractive to community members than the Emergency Food Home Delivery program that was started up in response to COVID-19, and had required much more

investment in marketing to sustain it. That program has now been phased out and replaced with Groceries from The SEED.

Discretionary income is a vital component to the long-term employment of youth who complete the Good Food Work Experience program. The more discretionary income brought in through social enterprise activities, the more youth that can be employed.

The SEED has invested in understanding how resilient the social enterprise model can be. They have commissioned an academic study on social enterprises in Canada to determine a model for profitable social enterprises, including the predicted timeframe required to reach financial self-sustainability¹⁹. This research has shown that it is likely to take 5 to 10 years for social enterprises in Canada to offset costs, which The SEED's social enterprises are well on the way to achieving. This research has led to increased confidence among The SEED staff that they have taken the most appropriate strategies toward growth and development of their social enterprises.

In addition to following a sustainable model and remaining confident that they are on the right track for financial self-sustainability in the 5- to 10-year range, The SEED's social enterprise model is scalable to other communities and can be expanded. Part of what attracts social investors to this model is that there are other opportunities to contribute beyond volunteerism and monetary donation (e.g., other members of the food sector can participate through selling and donating food that will be distributed through The SEED's enterprises). The financial self-sustaining nature of the social enterprise model is also attractive to partners and donors who know that their contributions are part of a larger revenue-generating operation.

Although growth in the social enterprises has not been as expected in 2020 due to COVID-19, over the long term, The SEED staff believe that the model will be sustainable and are committed to continuing to provide work placements for NEET youth. Now that they have adapted to the challenges of COVID-19, the enterprises are rebranded and are beginning to grow again. The SEED staff remains committed to centering the social enterprise aspect of their work.

Key Learnings and Recommendations

In a process evaluation, early stages of program development and implementation are assessed. As evaluators, we ask questions about whether the program activities were implemented and if not, what was learned about implementation. The Collective was transparent about its intention to be flexible with implementation of the Social Enterprise Program, recognizing that the program would be adjusted as new data became available each year. Below are some of the key, high-level learnings that have been amassed over the past 3 years of program implementation:

- Recruitment of NEET youth can be challenging, both as participants into the program and as respondents to surveys and interviews for evaluation of the program. This is an ongoing

¹⁹ The SEED plans to share the model when the research is complete

challenge of working with NEET youth and requires flexibility and strong relationship-building skills.

- Information sharing and regular communication of updates with program partners is key to the successful recruiting of youth into the program. In order to market the program to potential youth participants, partners need to be acutely aware of what the experience would be like for youth if they get involved. Inviting partners to visit the work sites for first-hand experience and having youth alumni from the program visit information sessions hosted by partners are both helpful recruiting strategies.
- Providing a smaller number of youth with longer-lasting, meaningful employment contracts may be more important than enrolling a larger number of youth through the experiential learning component without meaningful employment placements available to all of them. It is important to continually discuss with program partners how the program model needs to be shifted based on the funding and work placements available. For example, fewer placements available means that a rolling, case-by-case enrollment model may be preferable to quarterly enrollment of cohorts.
- The program runs smoothest when staff and youth roles are clearly defined and expectations clearly set; the Work Standards Agreement is a good way to provide this structure.
- It is important to adequately train staff on common needs and challenges of working with NEET youth. Preparing staff to make referrals and connections to social supports is necessary to ensure all youth are able to get the additional support they need for success in the program.

As lessons were learned and evaluated over the past 3 years, recommendations have been made which led to changes in implementation. The following recommendations are based on year 3 learnings, although some build on recommendations from previous years that are still works-in-progress.

Summary of Recommendations

Compensating youth

Youth felt that the 3-week training program was a long time to go without pay and suggested that some type of financial compensation could be useful and could encourage more youth to enroll. Consider ongoing discussions with program partners around possibilities for compensating youth for the experiential learning component of the program. It will be important to keep in mind financial resources, and the work experience locations' own organizational needs as they relate to financially compensating youth prior to employment.

Re-Evaluate Logic Model

After 3 years of experience implementing the program and making reflexive changes based on key learnings each year, the program has mostly remained well aligned with the initial program logic model. Some areas, however, may benefit from being redefined or reprioritized.

For example, the program intended to impact physical and mental health through connecting youth with supports in the community. Although the evaluation set out to track the number of referrals and connections to mental and physical health supports in the community, due to the informal nature of how these connections were made and the large network of individuals interacting with youth and providing connections, the data was unable to be tracked quantitatively. However, participants shared many stories of how their mental health improved because of their experience with the program. This feedback suggests that the outcome of being referred and connected to community supports may be better aligned in the program model as a medium-term outcome of **improved physical and mental health**. This broadened outcome can be impacted in many ways, and referrals and connections within the community is only one potential indicator of such.

Advance planning and rolling enrollments

On the advice of program partners responsible for generating interest in the program among youth and organizing their enrollment, give partners at least 2 months notice of upcoming training opportunities. This lead time would give partners a chance to get their clients informed and interested in the program, with enough time to enroll. More lead time would also allow interested youth to make necessary arrangements in their lives to be able to be present for the experiential learning component and any employment that follows.

Based on the trends seen in the programming over the past year, there are two feasible avenues that would provide partners with the time they need to get clients interested and involved. The first is to create a predictable schedule for when programming is to be offered throughout each year. For example, experiential learning components may be offered 3 times a year at dates set in advance (equalling 3 cohorts of youth participants). The other option is based on feedback provided by Youth Opportunities Unlimited (YOU), who suggested shifting to continuous program enrollment throughout the year as opposed to cohorts. This enrollment process would make available a training position for youth any time that they are ready. Furthermore, such one-on-one training may be easier to implement within the context of COVID-19 restrictions. If one-on-one training (as opposed to the 3-week group training cohort) is the only way to make continuous enrollment available, consider the value added and lost in making such a shift.

Youth spokesperson

Consider formalizing the process of including a youth in the information sessions. Youth who have gone through the program are able to talk to other youth during recruitment sessions to explain firsthand what the program is like, and ideally, share with other youth how the program benefitted them personally. This strategy has been identified by program partners as an important method for generating interest in the program among other youth and could be either in-person or in video format.

Maintaining long-term contact with youth

It has been challenging to maintain contact with youth for follow-up interviews after their participation has ended. Improving the system for long-term communication within the network of

youth will not only benefit future evaluation work (measuring medium- and long-term employment and training outcomes) but will also support the social network for employment-related opportunities of youth who have completed the experiential learning or an initial placement within the Social Enterprise Program. Partners such as Lutherwood and Ontario Works will be important to involve in this process as caseworkers often have longer-term contact with participants.

Build new partnerships

A key recommendation for improving program recruitment is to continue building partnerships with new organizations each year. Some existing program partners have noted that there are only so many clients they see who are interested in food sector work, and fewer still who are able to take on volunteer work in order to gain contract employment. The more partners involved in outreach, the wider the net can be cast. Examples of promising new partners are Anishnabeg Outreach Employment and Training, and the Upper Grand District School Board's Centre for Continuing Education.

Conclusion

"I think the value of the program is in its social capital building, it's in the staff there, and their devotion to community betterment." (Program partner)

The long-term intended outcomes of The SEED's Social Enterprise Program are a community with no barriers to healthy food, and a stronger food economy that engages youth. The Good Food Work Experience was designed to achieve these outcomes through job-related training and experience and ongoing one-to-one support. The project sought to help local youth who face some of the most significant and complex obstacles to employment. The evaluation shows that The SEED has made significant progress in this work.

Participating youth reported experiencing improved mental and physical health as a result of participating in the program. Rapport was developed between supervisors and youth, and youth felt supported in the program. After participating in the experiential learning component, youth were more likely to feel that they had someone to depend on if they needed it.

Youth who were not engaged with employment, education or training when they began the program expanded their employment-related social connections: After participating in the experiential learning component, youth were much more likely to feel that they had someone in their community whom they could ask about employment opportunities, and that they had someone to observe directly to discover new work-related interests.

The majority of youth involved in the experiential learning component also started thinking about employment or education related goals. In order to set goals, youth need to be able to feel confident that they can be achieved. Accordingly, youth experiencing increased confidence was one of the most commonly referred to benefits of the program among youth interviewed.

One of the most direct outcomes of the Good Food Work Experience is providing youth with increased job experience. At the end of the first 3 years of the program, 20 youth had been employed by the Social Enterprise Program.

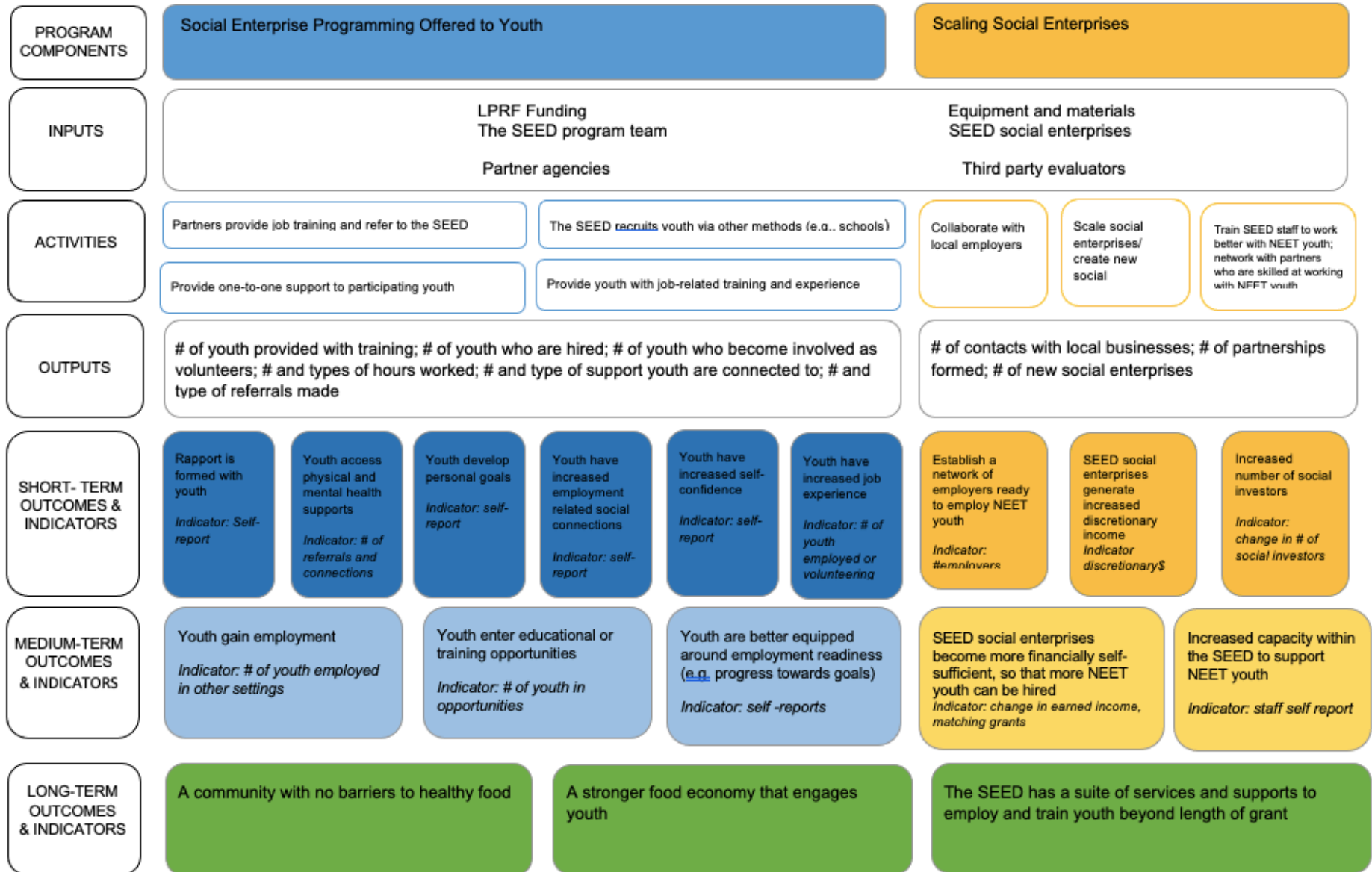
These short-term outcomes led to the medium-term outcome of improved employment readiness (indicated through development of work-related skills and training). The medium-term outcome of youth gaining employment, education or training opportunities beyond their experience with the Social Enterprise Program was not measured, although recommendations have been made to improve long-term follow-up with participants in the future.

This program has faced many challenges in the past 3 years, ranging from expected recruitment difficulties to the unexpected global shut-down due to the pandemic. Throughout all of the challenges, The Collective has shown immense capacity for flexibility (both with program design and with expectations for youth) and a strong dedication to impacting the lives of the individuals who seek work experience through the Social Enterprise Program.

Youth employment programs across Ontario struggle to provide the kinds of support that will enable vulnerable and marginalized youth to connect to their communities and gain employment. The work of the SEED over the last three years suggests that their work experience model holds great potential for changing the lives of NEET youth. The model continues to evolve, and there is much still to be learned, but the story of the Good Food Work Experience illustrates what is possible with dedicated staff and partners and commitment to youth voice and agency and ongoing evaluation. The SEED did not simply provide work experience. It provided meaningful work. Youth were given an opportunity to contribute to the health of their community in the most tangible way possible – through sharing food - while working as part of a supportive team and earning income. Ultimately, the success of this program is a tribute to the hard work and bravery of the participating youth themselves.

Appendix

PROGRAM LOGIC MODEL FOR THE SEED SOCIAL ENTERPRISE PROGRAM



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