

Pathways to Economic Advancement, Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Innovations in American Government Award Case Study

JANUARY 2022



HARVARD Kennedy School

ASH CENTER

for Democratic Governance
and Innovation

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Foreword

For the 2020 Innovations in American Government Awards competition, the Ash Center specifically sought initiatives that were increasing economic mobility and alleviating poverty among their constituents. We were pleased to see many innovations that were addressing inequity in the workforce, and one program stood out as an exemplar. The Massachusetts Pathways to Economic Advancement is an initiative launched in 2016 with the goal of supporting limited English speakers in finding gainful employment, as well as making the successful transition to continuing and higher education.

The project is a partnership among the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; Jewish Vocational Service (JVS Boston); and Social Finance, a Boston-based nonprofit, and is the first Pay for Success initiative in the United States to focus exclusively on workforce development. Notably, all investors in the program were paid back in full and significantly earlier than expected.

These service providers work together to provide a series of workforce development services. Participants receive vocational English language classes that are integrated with job search assistance and coaching for successful transitions to employment, higher-wage jobs, and higher education. The project also matches employers with potential employees, and employees with the skills employers need. The program team is committed to ongoing data collection and analysis and continual process improvement.

We are immensely grateful to Jeanne Batalova for her thorough site visit of the Pathways program and for her expert analysis of the program in this report.

–Stephen Goldsmith

Executive Summary

Adult English learners (ELs) are as likely to find jobs in the U.S. labor market as those who speak English fluently. There are significant differences, however, when it comes to salary, job quality, and professional opportunities. Today, more than 240,000 working-age adults are in need of English-language services in Greater Boston, with most seeking to improve their English fluency to find a job or get promoted. Despite this need, only 11,600 adults receive English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services each year. As a result, adult ELs are often limited in their ability to contribute to local and state economies in terms of taxes and consumer spending.

Developed by Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) in Boston, the Massachusetts Pathways to Economic Advancement (Pathways) program started with a fundamental question: Given the high unmet demand for vocational and workplace English, how do we effectively scale up a proven workforce-oriented model of teaching adults English for employment. Through its four program tracks and an innovating funding model (Pay for Success), Pathways offers a continuum of work-related ESOL services coupled with individualized job coaching and job placement.

There are five innovations that differentiate Pathways from other workforce development programs. First, the project focuses on each client as “a whole person” rather than “a person in need of English skills.” Second, it is able to adapt quickly to internal and external challenges through constant, incremental process improvement. Third, Pathways carefully tracks client wage gains through the first-ever data-sharing system in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Fourth, program staff work closely with members of the private sector, forging relationships with their clients’ prospective employers. And finally, Pathways empowers clients and staff by building strong partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders in the community.

Like Greater Boston, many communities across the nation have demographically significant immigrant-origin populations that need support before they can fully participate economically and socially. Pathways’ key features, including blending vocational and ESOL programs for adult ELs; using evidence-based training programs; exploring different funding models; and analyzing administrative wage, educational outcome, and other data are all becoming more widespread in the field. During times of great economic uncertainty, like the United States is experiencing right now, skills like vocational English become even more important for immigrant workers, their families, and the communities in which they live.

Introduction

Few skills help immigrants and refugees succeed socially and economically in their destination country like fluency in that country's language. Extensive research demonstrates that the inability to speak their host-country language has a strong, negative impact on immigrants and refugees' job prospects and social and civic integration.¹ In the Greater Boston region, more than 240,000 working-age adults are in need of English-language services, with another 7,700 expected to join their ranks every year.² The size of the adult EL population stands in stark contrast with the number receiving English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services annually: 116 active ESOL programs serve just 11,600 ELs. Critically, only 10 of these programs focus on vocational and workplace ESOL.³ While adult ELs seek ESOL services for both work and non-work-related reasons, demand for high-quality programs that help them find employment, improve their earnings, and get promoted is extremely high.

Immigrants and refugees make up the largest group of adult ELs. They are diverse in terms of linguistic and cultural background, education level, legal status, family composition, and income level. Today, they and their U.S.-born offspring, collectively known as immigrant-origin adults, represent the main source of growth of the Commonwealth and Greater Boston's labor force. Combined with an aging population and the need for more highly skilled workers in a knowledge-based economy, these trends beg the question: What are the best ways to promote economic and social mobility for low-skilled ELs and, as a result, to generate higher tax revenue and reduce public spending when these workers obtain better-paying jobs and use fewer public benefits?

These questions gain even greater urgency as the COVID-19 pandemic has decimated millions of U.S. jobs across the skills spectrum.⁴ Furthermore, industries that employ many immigrant and refugee workers, such as retail, trade, and hospitality, were hit particularly hard.⁵ Recent research shows that immigrant workers, especially those with lower levels of education and English proficiency, have experienced disproportionately greater job loss.⁶ As Massachusetts and other U.S. states begin to reopen, workers will not be returning to the strong economy and tight labor market that existed pre-COVID-19. That means work-relevant skills will be even more essential to restoring the well-being of individuals, their families, and their communities.

Drawing on a site visit and multiple interviews with JVS staff and clients, Pay for Success (PFS) project partners, stakeholder organizations, and national experts in the field of workforce development and immigrant integration, this case study describes the Pathways model, including client profiles and key services. It also explores Pathways' unique features and the challenges it has faced in implementing and sustaining its highly effective programs. This case study aims to act as a guide for organizations or jurisdictions looking to replicate the program's success in the adult education space or in adopting a Pay for Success (PFS) model.

This paper starts with a description of the Pathways program model, including the clients it serves and the four programmatic tracks. Next, it describes Pathways' most important outcomes at the time of the site visit in February 2020. It then outlines Pathways' most innovative features and discusses the program's main challenges. Finally, the paper highlights the aspects of the program worthy of replication.

Case Study Methodology

This case study draws on extensive conversations with JVS management, instructors, and coaches in each of the four programs during the author’s site visit to JVS in February 2020 as well as JVS program documentation and publications about JVS and Pathways. The author also spoke with Pathways’ program participants about their career goals, expectations, and experiences at JVS and with key PFS project partners (the initial innovators). PFS project partners included:

- Staff at the Executive Office of Administration and Finance and at the Executive Office of Education, who detailed the origins of Pathways-like models and the government vision for adult education programs in the future.
- Staff from Social Finance, who explained the intricate details of the PFS vehicle and how it was used to launch Pathways.
- Staff at Economic Mobility Corporation, who described the early results of their evaluations of Pathways’ client wage gains.
- A former staff member at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Government Performance Lab, who described the details and challenges of setting up a data-sharing system.

Additionally, the author interviewed two stakeholder organizations in the area of ESOL and adult literacy in Greater Boston—English for New Bostonians and World Education—and the Massachusetts State Adult Education Director, who shared her thoughts on trends and challenges in adult education and how PFS/P4P models (with private or public funding) could be used to help adults improve their economic and social outcomes. The author also had in-depth conversations with two national-level experts in the field of immigrant integration and workforce development.

About Pathways

Pathways began as a pilot in 2016 through Pay for Success (PFS), which provided the program with \$12.4 million in flexible private funding. Pathways is the first PFS project in the U.S. focusing exclusively on adult education and workforce development for low-skilled adults. From the beginning, an explicit public policy goal of the project was to leverage private investment to promote economic mobility of working-age immigrant and refugee adults and, as a result, to increase public dollars through higher taxes and/or lower use of public benefits by employed and better-paid workers.⁷

Pathways offers four program tracks intended to assist adult English Learners (ELs) with valid work permits to transition directly into jobs or college, with the explicit purpose of increasing their income or increasing their likelihood of college enrollment. These are:

- Rapid Employment, which offers vocational English, basic job, and “soft” skills training to clients (most of whom are newly arriving refugees) looking for their first job.
- Occupational Skill Training, which focuses on vocational training, certification or licensing, and job placement in the healthcare, and hospitality sectors.
- English for Advancement (EFA), which provides English-language services and job placement for students seeking to enter the labor market and/or career advancement.
- Bridges to College, which provides remedial math, science, and English-language coursework, as well as college and career counseling services, for adults seeking to enter community college.

Through its four distinct tracks, Pathways offers a continuum of work-related ESOL services based on clients' needs, coupled with individualized language and job readiness assessments for new clients and job search coaching and assistance. A generous average cost per student of \$5,300 (versus an average of \$1,500 in a typical program) makes it possible to offer services to a larger number of clients in several locations, have enough room to test new models of intervention, and expand recruitment efforts. Thanks to PFS, which provided up-front working capital, Pathways has served 2,000 ELs between 2016 and 2019, making significant progress in reducing the waitlist for ESOL services in Greater Boston and offering their clients a path to improved employment opportunities in a short period of time.

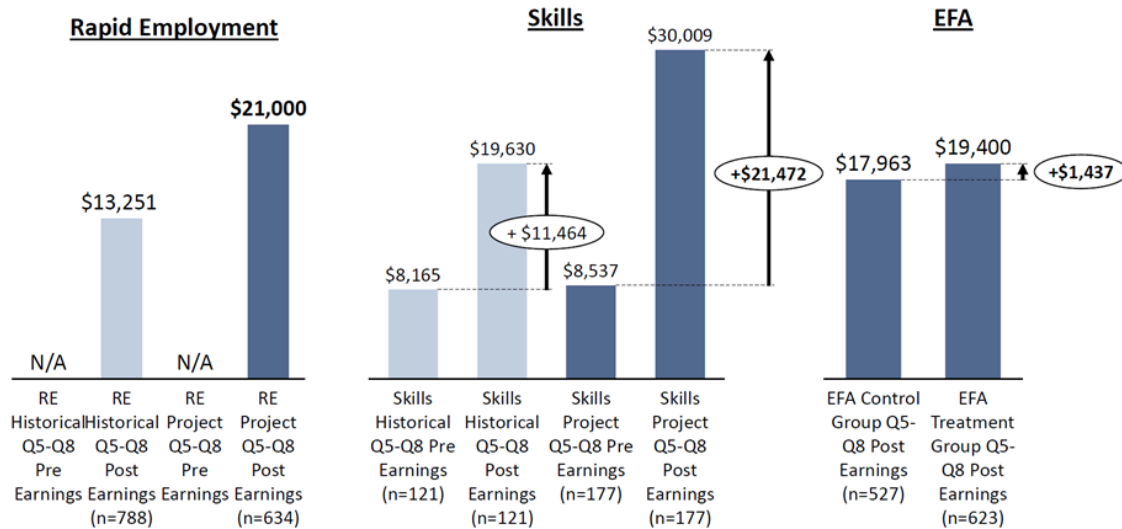
JVS management tracks and analyzes client outcomes for each of the four program tracks on a regular basis, with Economic Mobility Corporation, an independent organization, also evaluating all client outcomes. The achievement of outcomes in the first two tracks, Rapid Employment and Occupational Skill Training, is measured through the analysis of government wage data on program clients. The success of English for Advancement (EFA) clients is evaluated through a randomized controlled trial, also using administrative wage data. Finally, the Bridges to College program is evaluated through the use of Department of Higher Education data.

Main Outcomes

The evaluation of Pathways' outcomes is based on matching state wage data with Pathways' client data. In terms of the early outcomes based on JVS's own analysis and analysis done by Economic Mobility Corporation published in November 2020, Pathways has met its projected targets for program enrollment, placement, and wage gains. Pathways graduates have been placed in Whole Foods, Sweetgreen, several hotels, local hospitals, health clinics, and rehab centers.

The state has already made several repayments to investors. A representative from the Executive Office of Administration (and a core stakeholder in the PFS initiative) recently stated that all private funders have recouped their initial investments, many with interest, and the project reached maximum contract six quarters early in Q15 (see image.)

► PROJECT Q15 RE, SKILLS AND EFA FINAL OUTCOME – 2 OF 2



Preliminary earnings estimates do not guarantee final project results**
 Source: Mobility Wage Analysis for Enrolled Participants who enrolled in Occupational Skills Training, Rapid Employment, and English for Advancement from 7/2016 to 6/2018
 Note: The Rapid Employment Final Outcome is calculated as the post-enrollment earnings in Q5 to Q8, in accordance with Schedule C of the Pay for Success Contract
 Social Finance, Inc. © 2021 Confidential

Source: Jewish Vocational Services

Further, while the final evaluation report will not be out until 2022, the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) recently awarded JVS a new Pay for Performance (P4P) contract for almost \$6 million, showing confidence in Pathways’ long-term success. This contract includes three services that were part of Pathways’ original plan plus two additional services. In total, more than 1,300 students will receive services under the new P4P contract. Most importantly, the English for Advancement track will serve 1,011 clients in the next three years, the exact number served in the PFS contract.

In terms of programmatic outcomes, the site visit, which included a review of internal reports, generated the following insights:

Pathways’ four programs are fully operational. All four tracks continuously enroll students and offer classes throughout the week. In addition to word of mouth, Pathways has a wide range of outreach methods to attract new clients, including social media, various online platforms, and a collaboration with a MassHIRE Career Center.

Most instructors either hold an ESOL teaching certificate or have experience teaching English. Many have worked with immigrant and refugee populations prior to joining JVS. The overwhelming majority of staff works full time, and staff retention is high. Teachers and coaches are passionate about their work and emphasized their commitment to students’ success, a core value they share with JVS.

Using data has enhanced service delivery. JVS uses ETO, a case management software, to track detailed information about students at enrollment, including their progress, program engagement over time and employment, wage, and college enrollment outcomes. This systematic, comprehensive, data-driven approach is used to gauge whether Pathways' four program tracks are achieving the expected outcomes at the end of the contract. Program staff and JVS's management evaluate quantitative and qualitative information regularly and make adjustments to adapt to changing circumstances.

Building a successful partnership between all involved parties has led to a significant improvement in the governance process, among other impacts. The Commonwealth was the originator of the call for innovative programs to serve ELs with the goal to increase their earnings. Pathways was selected out of several bidders for its potential, level of preparation, and fresh thinking in service delivery. The Commonwealth was keen on staying closely involved to help the project succeed and provide oversight. Working with both private and public partners (i.e., three government agencies, JVS, and Social Finance) on the project, with an agreed-upon set of performance metrics, was fairly new for the Commonwealth. However, it led to significant improvement in the procurement process.

According to government representatives, Pathways became a prime example of collaborative problem solving. It showed how working groups, comprising partners with operational decision-making authority, are able to overcome barriers and inject flexibility into the process before any lengthy contract amendments might be needed. Regular meetings with JVS created a mutual flow of qualitative and quantitative information, allowing the partners to better understand the target population's needs (e.g., young mothers' willingness to take a pay cut to spend more time with their children) and to respond to unanticipated policy, economic, and other changes.

Logistical, Recruitment, and Other Key Challenges

Pathways encountered two unique obstacles in the development stage. One was the lack of public access to government wage data to verify wage gains of Pathways' clients, as required by the Commonwealth in the conception of the project. Collected by the Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance (DUA), administrative wage data are highly protected. It took significant effort and commitment by all partners—JVS, Social Finance, Government Performance Lab, and DUA—to design a data-sharing process that would meet the evaluation requirements while ensuring data confidentiality.

The second challenge was to meet client recruitment targets at the scale envisioned under the PFS model. The policies implemented by the Trump Administration, such as the Muslim Travel Ban, revisions to the public charge rule, and, importantly, a major reduction in refugee admission numbers, made it difficult to recruit clients. Many fewer refugees were admitted to the country and arrived in Greater Boston than Pathways had anticipated. Moreover, immigrants, regardless of their legal status, were less willing to seek community and social services. Pathways had to re-think its outreach strategy and put extra effort into recruitment, but it eventually met its enrollment targets. Recruitment efforts consisted of targeted community outreach and paid advertising, including social and print media and distributing flyers via neighborhoods, businesses, and public transit. The biggest referral source for the program was word of mouth, which likely means that the friends and family members who referred clients to the program became aware of EFA through all of the various outreach methodologies mentioned.

Additionally, Pathways faced other challenges that are common for ESOL providers. For instance, they lacked the space to offer more flexible class schedules and more convenient locations to accommodate EL clients who juggle multiple family and work responsibilities. By leveraging JVS's relationships with community-based organizations, like East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, two community colleges, and MassHire Career Centers, Pathways is now able to offer both full- and part-time programs in several locations around Greater Boston.

Going forward, it is important to recognize that Pathways launched and, until recently, has been operating in a strong economy and tight labor market, which created many opportunities for adult ELs with work permits to get a new or better-paying job. The coronavirus pandemic has generated widespread job losses. Losses have been steepest in several non-essential service sectors that employ large numbers of immigrant and refugee workers. While higher unemployment may mean a greater number of clients seeking JVS services, a program whose funding is tied to clients' economic outcomes could face significant difficulties in delivering on its promise in the future.

Pathways' Innovative Features

In his seminal work on key features that define the characteristics of an innovative organization in the public sector, Sandford Borins identified five building blocks of innovation: the use of a systemic approach; process improvement; the use of new technology; the involvement of the private or voluntary sectors; and empowerment of communities, citizens, or staff.⁸ Pathways models all five of these building blocks:

1. **Taking a systemic approach by focusing on each client as “a whole person” rather than “a person in need of English skills.”** Pathways serves EL adults whose needs go beyond English language skills, and it does not limit its services to those with a high chance for success. Half of the clients are women, most are married with family responsibilities, and a significant share (50 percent of Rapid Employment and 30 percent of EFA clients) have been in the U.S. for less than a year and lack critical social and cultural capital. In three of the four program tracks, 50 percent or more of the clients are parents of young children, despite child care and family responsibilities often being at odds with class attendance. The majority of Rapid Employment and English for Advancement (EFA) clients have low literacy in their native language, and 37 percent of Rapid Employment and 18 percent of EFA clients lack a high school diploma.

A great deal of thought has gone into tackling a key challenge that plagues many instructional programs: students dropping out. To boost students' accountability and engagement with the program, Pathways makes coaching an integral component of each track. They were able to fund this because they built the full cost of services into the PFS contract. Clients receive ongoing coaching related not only to the class material and job searching but also to broader community resources that aim to address common barriers such as childcare or transportation difficulties. Pathways also helps to build comradery among clients to equip them with social capital and support (e.g., by having a dedicated WhatsApp group) and to develop their problem-solving skills as a team. Teachers invite former students to share their experiences and offer networking tips.

2. **Process improvement through adaptability to internal and external challenges.** Pathways' strategic and careful planning of its recruitment efforts and service delivery almost got derailed several times. The launch of the Rapid Employment program, geared specifically to refugees, coincided with the announcement of the Muslim Ban in 2017 and major cuts in refugee admissions by the Trump Administration. Pathways was able to mitigate the impact of these macro-level

changes by mobilizing resources and putting extra effort into recruitment. Additionally, JVS responded nimbly to employer suggestions needs as they arose. For example, when one employer asked for additional training on communication via email, JVS incorporated training on email correspondence, and computer literacy more broadly, across all four program tracks.

3. **Creating the first-ever data sharing system in the Commonwealth to track wage data.** Using government data to assess the project's success was a key requirement set by the Commonwealth. The partners wanted to be able to analyze both historical data, to develop payment terms, and post-training wage data from clients' records to evaluate Pathways' outcomes. However, setting up a data-sharing system for administrative wage data that matches JVS's clients proved to be a challenging process. No prior models and processes existed, so the partner organizations had to overcome multiple legal, technical, and practical barriers in accessing sensitive data from different departments' systems. Thanks to this pioneering effort, the state government now has a data-sharing agreement model in place for its procurement contracts that could be used by future programs that focus on earnings gains.

As a result, models like Pathways have the potential to contribute to systems change in adult education by focusing on employment outcomes. In the past, existing institutional norms often linked programmatic success in adult basic education to the number of people attending classes or their English language gains. Pathways, however, contributes to systems change by serving as a pilot adult education service program focused on both client and employer needs. Furthermore, the use of randomized control trial methodology is in itself a novel element, as most ESOL programs are not assessed this way.

4. **Involving the private sector by building close ties with employers.** Even with the best workforce development program, what ultimately matters is whether employers are willing to hire program graduates. While some employers are simply unaware of this work-ready pool, others are reluctant to hire immigrant and refugee workers due to confusion over visa status and hiring qualifications or anxiety about workers' familiarity with American business culture. Pathways' staff see themselves as a bridge between clients and local employers. Staff cultivate relationships with employers, learning about their hiring requirements, job expectations, locations, and work culture and match students to appropriate opportunities.
5. **Empowering communities and staff by building strong partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders in the community.** Pathways has built relationships with community-based organizations like East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, Lawrence CommunityWorks, LHAND, and others, two community colleges, and MassHire Career Centers, among others. Additionally, Pathways' staff are encouraged to bring innovations to their classrooms and share them with others. For instance, one English for Advancement program teacher came up with a creative idea to start building an online presence for her students by having them create and connect to each other's LinkedIn profiles *before* they completed the program.

Conclusion

Pathways is both a role model and a harbinger of several broader trends in national and state governments' thinking about how governments should measure what works, for whom, and at what cost. National policy, as outlined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014, instructs states to align their adult education and workforce development systems by establishing common performance indicators. WIOA placed greater emphasis on providing English instruction for the purpose of training and employment and required states to use wage records to measure the

performance of WIOA's six core programs, including Title II-supported programs that serve ELs. Today, both governments and private funders seek to identify evidence-based training programs and reward them based on their performance outcomes. The State Wage Interchange System Initiative allows states to exchange anonymized employment and earnings data with other states, and such data will become more accessible for research and evaluation purposes. In response to recent state legislation, the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is now in the process of setting up more P4P models to pay for outcomes like employment at a particular rate and completion of industry-recognized credentials.

The reality is that these policy changes and data-sharing initiatives make their way into the state and national adult basic education and workforce development systems slowly. Models like Pathways give the governments the confidence and evidence to support these developments. These models also pave the way for other innovative vocational programs for adult ELs that are ready to measure client outcomes with robust methodologies and reliable government data.

Without a doubt, Pathways can be replicated in other jurisdictions. Like Greater Boston, many communities across the United States face labor force and fiscal pressures related to population aging, and yet they struggle to upskill efficiently the available immigrant and refugee populations who lack work-related skills and English language proficiency. Building on the key elements of the Pathways' program—that is, combining vocational and ESOL programs for EL adults; leveraging different funding models; accessing and analyzing quantitative data and qualitative feedback to continue improving the quality of the services—other organizations can build, and with time scale up, their own programs for EL adults. What is remarkable about JVS's Pathways is that the program gained support and enthusiasm from the broader community, scale up its services, and transform government procurement processes and oversight. This demonstrates what is possible when an adult education program is designed and implemented thoughtfully and intentionally.

Pathways is a strong pilot program in the field of adult education and workforce development. From a 10,000-foot view, the intent of developing models like Pathways is not to force out existing adult education programs but to demonstrate the efficacy of a focused, *employment outcome*-driven program for adult ELs. However, from a 30,000-foot view, and keeping in mind broader policy implications, there are two points to consider regarding how funding decisions are to be made in the future.

First, Pathways is evaluated based on narrowly defined outcomes. On one hand, the outcomes are tangible, clearly defined, and could be measured using existing government data. On the other hand, these gains do not capture all aspects of economic and educational success that can yield positive benefits for the participants, their communities, and the state overall.

Second, because of the funding focus on employment and the use of W-2 administrative data to evaluate wage gains, Pathways is closed to workers not captured in W-2 data, such as independent contractors, those who are self-employed, and undocumented immigrant workers. It also excludes adult ELs whose primary goal in improving their English skills is not employment. For instance, parents of school-age children come to ESOL programs so they can be more effective advocates in their children's education). Further, in rural communities, better-paying jobs may not be available, so using an employment-driven training model is less helpful. City and state policy makers need to consider the well-being of these adults as well.

While these are not criticisms of Pathways per se, policymakers, who are considering the best ways to direct their state and city investments into models that promote the well-being of all residents across all communities, have to recognize the potential for exclusion of certain populations. A model like Pathways has to be considered with local needs and resources in mind. In sum, Pathways is a highly innovative project model that offers tremendously valuable lessons for other adult service providers in Greater Boston and nationally.

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