

The Cookie Cart Program evaluation summary

About the program

The Cookie Cart is a nonprofit employment program that serves youth living in or near North Minneapolis – an area with high unemployment, in which youth frequently must compete with adults for jobs. The Cookie Cart offers the opportunity for youth, ages 14 to 17, to develop life, leadership, and job skills through training and employment at a retail and commercial bakery.

Evaluation approach

This is the second year Wilder Research collected and analyzed satisfaction data for the program. Cookie Cart participants completed a self-administered survey describing their experiences at Cookie Cart and their views of the value of the Cookie Cart employment experience. Parents completed a telephone survey. This year's participation rate more than doubled last year's, with 64 youth and 30 parents completing surveys.

Youth demographics

This year's survey includes youth who have participated in the program for anywhere from 3 months to 2 years.

- About 60 percent of participants are female
- Most participants are in the 10th or 11th grade
- Fifty-seven percent of youth served are African American, 16 percent are Hmong, and 13 percent are of mixed racial background
- The remaining participants identified themselves as Asian and African

Youth survey results

A significant percentage of the youth surveyed reported increases in their skills and attitudes as a result of their participation in the program, including:

- Readiness to find and keep a job after working at Cookie Cart (81%)
- Ability to present themselves as an experienced employee (81%)
- Ability to work as a team member (79%)
- Willingness to carry out responsibilities (78%)

- Comfort talking to a potential employer (77%)
- Ability to interview for a job (76%)
- Skills in serving customers (73%)
- Ability to make good decisions (70%)
- Ability to keep scheduled commitments (69%)

In response to an open-ended question, nearly one in three youth reported that the best thing about Cookie Cart is the people they work with that are their age, the fun they have working with new kids, and famous people they sometimes meet. When asked how the program might improve, several common themes emerged, including an interest in more customer service and cash register training, and strategies for learning to work faster and more efficiently.

Gender, grade level and time in the program

Wilder Research analyzed the youth survey responses by gender, grade in school, and length of time in the program to see if there were any significant patterns in the data collected. Major benefits of the program are relatively consistent across these categories.

Parent survey results

In general, parents' ratings were higher than youths':

- 97% of parents reported that their child was better able to work as a team member, compared to 79 percent of youth
- 93% of parents reported their child was more ready to find and keep a job
- 90% of all parents reported their child had an improved ability to present themselves as an experienced employee, compared to 81 percent of youth who rated themselves similarly
- 86% of parents reported that their son or daughter was more willing to help others, compared to 67 percent of youth
- 66% of parents reported that their child's grades had improved a little or a lot, compared to 28 percent of youth

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- 62% of parents reported that their son or daughter was now better able to get along at home compared to 34 percent of youth
- Other skills/attitudes that parents felt were improved were willingness to carry out responsibilities, ability to problem solve independently, and ability to get along with adults

Twenty-one percent of parents reported the one thing they liked the most about the Cookie Cart was that it provided job experience for teens and a chance to figure out what they need to learn about getting and maintaining work.

Issues to consider

Changes in survey results from year one to year two of the evaluation

A higher percentage of this year's youth (81%) reported feeling more prepared to find job after working at the Cookie Cart compared to youth (66%) that were surveyed in the first year of the evaluation. However, the percentage of youth who spent time thinking about or planning for college decreased from 60 percent the first year compared to 48 percent the second year.

These changes may be attributable to differences in the number and types of youth surveyed, or to changes in Cookie Cart's program design or implementation. However, the changes do seem to suggest that Cookie Cart is having a more consistent impact on youth's employment and social skills than on their academic interest and performance.

Cookie Cart currently provides strong incentives for youth to develop their job skills – including extra work shifts for employees who have demonstrated they can work hard and prove consistent and reliable,

and cash bonuses for youth who compete, and win, in dough-scooping contests. However—because Cookie Cart is intended primarily as an employment training program and not as an academic enrichment program—it does not currently offer any formal incentives for school success.

If stimulating interest in school is an important (albeit secondary) outcome for Cookie Cart, the program may want to consider developing a system of incentives for educational achievement – for example, by providing extra work opportunities for youth who maintain a certain grade point average or who show improvement in one or more subjects.

Barriers to parent participation

Some parent survey participation is difficult to achieve because of language barriers. Perhaps Cookie Cart may find it worthwhile to bring in a volunteer with foreign language skills, who could act as a liaison for the program. The volunteer could educate parents about the program and its goals when their child enters the program, and help Cookie Cart engage parents by checking in with them periodically by phone and preparing them for the survey.

Conclusion

The results of this year's Cookie Cart survey suggest that both parents and youth see considerable value in the program. Parents and youth value it for the employment and social skills training it provides, and also for the increased job readiness from the training and work experiences in the bakery. While it does not appear that the program has a significant impact on participants' enthusiasm for school or grades, parents believe it produces an interest in post-secondary training and educational experiences. Overall, the findings of the survey suggest that Cookie Cart is fulfilling its mission of offering North Minneapolis youth the opportunity to develop life, leadership and employment skills.

For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Cookie Cart*. For more information about this report, contact Thalia Cooper at Wilder Research, 651-280-2692.

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