Examining Implementation and Evaluation Readiness of Domus Programs

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Executive Summary

Domus is a youth development organization in Stamford, Connecticut, whose work is guided by the Domus Relational Model, a framework centered around five principles: trauma-responsive practice; anti-racism; positive youth development; loving relationships; and skill-building rooted in Thoughts, Emotions, and Behaviors, a form of cognitive behavioral therapy ("TEB" skills). A substantial body of research indicates the significance of the five core principles that underlie the Domus Relational Model.[1] Each principle is an important element of a supportive model, and they are interrelated. Moreover, the theoretical and evaluation base for the Domus model is strong, and the Domus model shares several similarities with other successful intervention approaches. Because the five competencies in the Domus model go beyond the supports and services in these other models, the Domus model may represent an important step forward.

The Domus leadership team works closely with staff and is committed to using data to guide its decisions. The organization employs positive approaches for young people ages 12 to 26 who are disconnected or disengaged from school and work, empowering them to pursue their path to self-sufficiency.[i]

Child Trends partnered with Domus for two years to examine the organization's two primary outcomes-producing programs: DomusWorks and School Engagement. This work included an assessment of the evidence-base underlying the program models and a review of implementation quality, data systems, participant outcomes, and readiness for formal quasi-experimental or experimental evaluation. The findings presented in this executive summary and throughout the full report draw on Child Trends' review of program and organization documents, regular meetings with Domus leadership, interviews and focus groups with staff and program participants, analysis of qualitative and quantitative program data, and the collaborative development and testing of a participant survey to assess outcomes aligned with the Domus Relational Model and theory of change.

Key implementation findings

Across both programs, Child Trends found strong evidence of Domus staff buy-in and alignment with the Relational Model. Staff consistently emphasized that love and trusting relationships form the foundation of their work with youth, enabling them to implement the remaining components of the model. Domus staff implement positive youth development using the Circle of Courage framework, which includes helping young people develop a sense of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. Although staff did not describe the Circle of Courage, their descriptions of how they support young people—including how they approach their case management system—reflected positive youth development concepts, particularly fostering a sense of belonging. For example, while each family advocate at a school has their own caseload, there is an expectation that each will also support *all* youth as needed. Elements of trauma-responsive practice, often framed through the Sanctuary model,[ii] appeared regularly in staff reflections, including references to social responsibility, community meetings, and safety plans. Newer staff noted that they require time and support to apply Sanctuary practices with confidence.

Staff further described anti-racism and equity as central elements of Domus' mission and as a recurring focus of training and booster sessions. Staff examples suggested that these practices are often youth-directed or value-driven rather than integrated into daily routines as other elements of the relational model are, providing an opportunity for leadership to clarify expectations for how anti-racism and equity should be reflected in day-to-day staff interactions with participants. As a regular part of their practice, staff also

[i] Dalio Education, Boston Consulting Group. (2023). *Connecticut's unspoken crisis: Getting young people back on track*. https://www.dalioeducation.org/Customer-Content/www/CMS/files/231011_Report_Final_vDigital_LowRes.pdf

[ii] Sanctuary Institute. (n.d.). *The Sanctuary Model*. https://www.thesanctuaryinstitute.org/about-us/the-sanctuary-model/

described using TEB skills, which come from an evidence-based curriculum of five discrete skills derived from cognitive-behavioral therapy. These skills, designed to be delivered by non-clinicians in a community-based setting, help young people to understand the connection between their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, change unhelpful thoughts and behaviors that perpetuate negative cycles, and ultimately respond in more regulated and intentional ways.

Program-specific findings showed strong alignment with intended models. In DomusWorks, youth and staff emphasized that the program is about far more than employment. Youth described feeling loved, supported, and personally and professionally guided. The program's flexible pacing allows youth to take different paths toward being work-ready. Analyses across qualitative data, dosage records, and program outcomes show that this flexibility enables outcomes-based progression for youth through the program, with variation across participants in length of time elapsed between program enrollment and successful program exit. In School Engagement, staff and youth consistently described frequent face-to-face contact—often exceeding dosage expectations—and emphasized the importance of long-term relationships, socioemotional support, and academic assistance as core drivers of improved attendance and graduation outcomes.

Key outcomes and dosage findings

Analyses of DomusWorks and School Engagement program data highlight several important trends in participant progress, service delivery, and long-term outcomes. In both programs, participants receive regular face-to-face contact with frontline program staff who are key to delivering Domus' Relational Model approach.[iii] The majority of participants successfully complete the programs and remain on track with their educational or employment journey for a year after leaving the programs. Specific key findings for each program are described below.

DomusWorks program

Numerous evaluations of employment and training programs conducted over recent decades suggest that, on average, such programs produce small but positive impacts on employment outcomes. More successful models tend to be comprehensive, offering intensive services and intentionally linking training with work. This evidence provides optimism that DomusWorks may have positive impacts on participants' employment outcomes and pathways toward self-sufficiency. This optimism is further strengthened by the integration of the Domus Relational Model, which augments more traditional workforce approaches with relational, trauma-informed, and youth-centered supports.

Frontline staff consistently deliver supportive in-person case management services as participants progress from building skills, to being employment-ready, and into the retention phase of the DomusWorks program. However, our analysis also found that attendance at the social enterprise job site was lower than expected, with many participants attending fewer than the targeted four days per week. DomusWorks staff and program directors used these findings to identify gaps in how attendance was tracked, made course corrections, and are now monitoring attendance data for improvement.

Most participants reach employment-ready status—that is, they are ready to seek employment outside of the Domus social enterprise—within six months. Young people who have encountered a greater number of obstacles—particularly challenges related to violence, incarceration, or complex caregiver relationships—require more time to reach this milestone. Among participants who have exited the program, 76 percent exited successfully (calculated among participants who exited either successfully or unsuccessfully; participants who exited for neutral reasons, such as moving out of the area, are not included in this

[iii] Domus Kids. (n.d.). *Approach*. https://domuskids.org/approach/

estimate); to exit the program successfully, participants must maintain fulltime employment[iv] outside of Domus for six months, a period of time during which they continue to receive job coaching from Domus staff. About 24 percent exited unsuccessfully, by disengaging from the program without being determined by Domus to be employment-ready or leaving without full-time employment; these participants are more likely to be those who have faced numerous obstacles.

Long-term outcomes among successful participants are strong. Among the 28 participants who had been out of the program for at least 12 months, 96 percent were employed full-time with benefits one year after program exit.

School Engagement program

Programs that reflect available research and theory are generally more successful in achieving outcomes than ad hoc interventions. Importantly, the Domus School Engagement program model is aligned with emerging research on effective academic programs, especially its recognition that social and emotional competencies can foster academic success. In addition, the program design reflects research on adolescent and child development, specifically the importance of seeking holistic outcomes (social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being outcomes, not just academic outcomes) across developmental domains. Research also recognizes that development takes place over time, and is influenced by varied social and structural contexts on development. The School Engagement program is premised on this understanding, providing strong social and personal supports to students over time.

Family Advocates in the School Engagement program consistently provide the expected face-to-face support and interactions. This in-person support is associated at the 95% confidence level with stronger school attendance and consistent grade promotion, high school graduation, and long-term outcomes, although it is not associated with suspension rates. In contrast, teacher connection and family engagement services show some association with negative short-term outcomes, suggesting that these services may be activated in response to emerging challenges. Many students do not regularly receive the full expected combination dosage of face-to-face contact, family engagement, and teacher connection services every month.

Program success is common: among the students who exited the program, 74 percent did so successfully by graduating from high school and enrolling in post-secondary education/training or attaining full time employment.[v] Twenty-six percent of students exited the program unsuccessfully, by disengaging from the program before graduation. As in the DomusWorks program, long-term outcomes among successful program graduates are quite strong: 90 percent were employed full-time or in school a year after leaving the program.

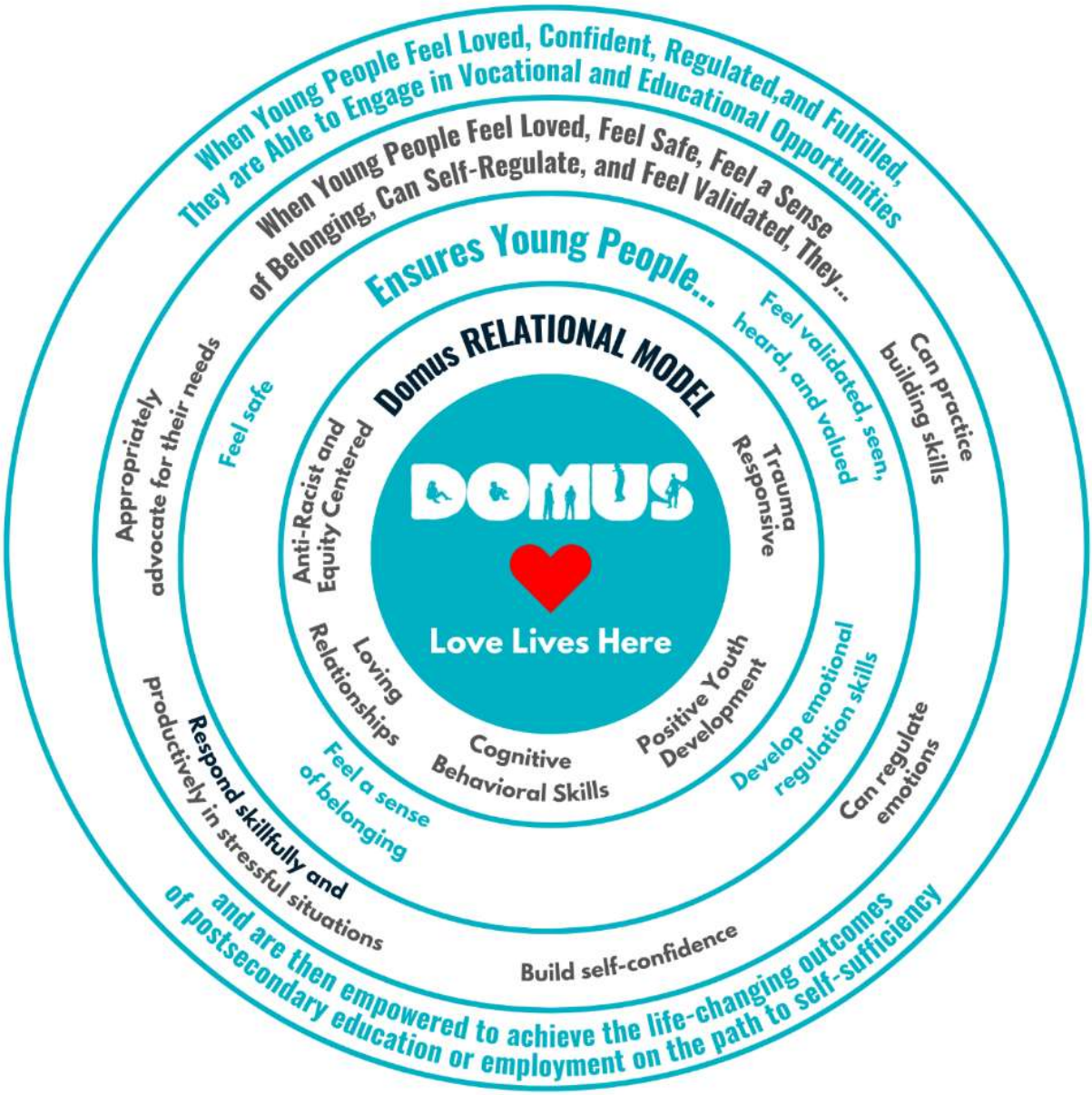
Measurement development and theory of change

To strengthen Domus' ability to track progress toward outcomes and support continuous improvement, Child Trends and Domus leadership collaborated to visualize the organization's theory of change (Figure 1) and translate it into measurable survey constructs such as self-regulation, self-worth, perseverance, interpersonal relationships, and teamwork. Child Trends and Domus leadership further refined how the theory of change translates into participant-reported survey questions. Survey items were developed iteratively with leadership and staff, refined through cognitive interviews with youth, and psychometrically tested with more than 150 School Engagement participants and 40 DomusWorks participants, resulting in

[iv] Program Success is defined as a participant securing a full-time job with employer or state benefits, or enrolling in an education/training program, and remaining employed or program for at least six months.
[v] Similar to the DomusWorks program, some participants leave the School Engagement program for neutral reasons, such as changing schools. Those participants are not counted in these estimates of successful or unsuccessful completion.

strong, reliable scales. Domus is now administering the revised surveys annually across both programs. One of many noteworthy findings from this work is the very positive ratings that participants give to their experiences with Domus. For example, most participants in the School Engagement and DomusWorks programs who completed the Relational Model survey reported that they felt loved all or most of the time, that they felt that staff listen to them, that they felt as though they belong in the Domus community, and that Domus has taught them how they can change their lives for the better. Child Trends was unable to identify comparable survey data for representative samples to provide a ready comparison with these Domus measures.

Figure 1. Domus Relational Model Developed to Identify Survey Constructs



Evaluation readiness

Taken together, findings from the implementation evaluation, program data analyses, and measurement development indicate that Domus is well-positioned for a future formal quasi-experimental or experimental evaluation.

Domus demonstrates:

- Strong staff buy-in to the Relational Model
- Consistent delivery of core program components
- A culture committed to continuous improvement
- A clear and measurable theory of change
- Reliable participant-level measures aligned with expected outcomes

Overall, the evidence suggests that Domus has a solid foundation for an evaluation that could rigorously assess its programs' impacts. The School Engagement program is closer to being ready for an experimental or quasi-experimental design than DomusWorks, which currently serves a smaller number of youth; a larger sample would be needed to potentially achieve statistical significance. Ongoing refinements—particularly around implementation of the Anti-Racism and Equity aspects of the Relational Model and increasing dosage consistency in services beyond the face-to-face connections with program staff —will further strengthen Domus' readiness for formal quasi-experimental or experimental evaluation and enhance its ability to deliver effective relational, equity-centered, trauma-responsive, positive youth development services.

Introduction

An estimated 63,000 youth ages 14 to 26 are disconnected from school and work in Connecticut[2]—a number that can accumulate each year if youth are not provided with supports and interventions to re-engage them in educational and employment opportunities. These young people need supports that enable them to complete high school and job training, providing a pathway to economic mobility for youth and enhancing the state's prosperity.

To address this issue, several organizations in Connecticut are working to engage and train youth to succeed in school and in the labor market. One of these organizations is Domus, located in Stamford, CT. Child Trends has worked collaboratively with Domus for two years across two phases. The first phase was a six-month project to assimilate and appreciate the Domus model. Building on this understanding, Child Trends prepared an assessment of Domus' readiness for evaluation, providing a broad overview of the DomusWorks and School Engagement programs and their readiness for a formal quasi-experimental or experimental evaluation. In addition, Child Trends reviewed the underlying philosophy of the Domus approach relative to research and theory on youth development, as well as previous evaluations of similar programs. A report was shared with Domus in July 2024.

During the second phase of this engagement, Child Trends collaborated with Domus staff members to complete an implementation evaluation, identify constructs for outcomes that Domus expects to result from implementation of its Relational Model, develop and test a survey for participants designed to assess these constructs, analyze program data from the School Engagement and Domus Works programs, and update the Evaluation Readiness Assessment.

This final report includes updated material from the initial July 2024 report (in *The Domus Model* and *Research Review* sections); these updated research reviews continue to support the Domus model, including the School Engagement and DomusWorks programs. Importantly, this report also provides summaries of the additional work completed during the following year and a half. In addition to this report, multiple documents are also shared; because of their size, they are linked in appendices.

The Domus Model

Domus developed the Domus Relational Model to guide their work to reconnect and support youth who are disengaged and disconnected from school and work. Child Trends' overview of the Domus Relational Model explored whether and how the Domus model is based in theory and research.

This model is based on five core principles:

- Trauma-Responsive Practice
- Being Anti-racist and Fostering Equity
- Positive Youth Development (PYD)
- Implementing Love
- Skill-Building in Thoughts, Emotions, and Behaviors (TEB)

These principles are intended to permeate all services and interactions across Domus' programs, including the School Engagement and DomusWorks programs, which are the focus of this report. Considerable time and effort are spent training staff to absorb these principles and use them in their ongoing work. Extensive training is conducted during an initial orientation when staff are hired, and through training and discussion sessions. In addition to providing training on these core competencies, Domus offers training in response to new questions that arise and to build specific skills that are identified by staff.

Research Review

A substantial body of research indicates the significance of the five core principles that underlie the Domus Relational Model.[3] Each principle is an important element of a supportive model, and they are interrelated. Moreover, these five core components flow conceptually. That is, these core components go from recognizing and addressing the challenges arising from trauma and racism, to denoting the effects of these challenges on the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (TEB) of youth, to identifying the more general skills that Domus employs to support these youth with the practices of PYD and love. Then, Domus leverages those relationships to advance continued skill-building in a young person's management of their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, which is a skillset that underlies the ability of a young person to express the "professional skills" essential for success in the traditional educational and workforce environments.

We recognize that experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage is frequently associated with experiencing trauma and racism.[4,5] Moreover, the negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that result from socioeconomic disadvantage, trauma, and racism can undermine a youth's recovery, well-being, and later socioeconomic success.[6] Thus, youth need educational and employment program interventions—such as the DomusWorks and School Engagement programs—delivered in a community committed to PYD and love. These education and employment program interventions are essential settings for the implementation of the core components of the Domus Relational Model.

Implementing love. An emphasis on love goes beyond what most programs aspire to offer. It signals that Domus staff intend to go beyond the usual program practices to offer participants what so many lack—philia, a caring commitment or deep friendship that is without caveats or reservations. Domus notes that "scientific research reveals the scientific underpinnings of the healing power of love. Our physiology is built for and thrives on love. Research shows that during attuned, caring interactions, our brains, oxytocin (the hormone that circulates throughout our brain and body), and our vagus nerve (the tenth cranial nerve that runs from our brain stem down to our heart, lungs, and other internal organs) work together, to create a virtuous cycle of resilience, wisdom and health. Furthermore, love, manifested through attuned interactions, where we have a sense of "I feel you, feeling me," plays an essential role in healing, connection and growth." While love cannot be randomly assigned and validated, there is substantial evidence from evaluations, such as evaluations of mentoring programs, that positive, supportive, and consistent relationships are associated with program recruitment, engagement, and completion.[7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13]

Trauma-responsive practice. Research consistently finds that experiencing acute and chronic trauma is associated with negative physical and emotional health, a lack of self-regulation, behavior problems, substance abuse, and poor social relationships.[14] Because experiencing trauma can profoundly undermine development, trauma-responsive practices are employed to avoid triggering traumatic memories, assure safety, avoid repetition of traumatic experiences, and support young people to move beyond the trauma they have experienced.[15,16] Informed by recent understandings of trauma, a youth development professional asks not "What is wrong with you?" but "What happened to you?"[17] Some evidence indicates that trauma-responsive practices can improve outcomes.[18,19] Domus uses the Sanctuary model to support trauma-responsive interactions with participants. This model is an approach to creating a trauma-responsive community that has a conceptual framework, a toolkit, and a specific strategy, such that according to the developer: "When an organization makes the commitment to implement Sanctuary, trains its staff in the philosophical underpinnings, embraces the language of [Safety, Emotion, Loss, and Future], and uses the Sanctuary tools, its members can expect to see improved outcomes for clients, improved staff retention and satisfaction, and decreased violence."[20] Experiencing trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are correlated, and experiences with ACEs can cause trauma. Moreover, there is a strong association between experiencing multiple ACEs and poor outcomes.[21] The Sanctuary model's theoretical underpinnings recognize the experiences of racism and poverty (which have recently been included in the list of ACEs, such as the Philadelphia Urban ACEs list) as potentially traumatic experiences.

Being anti-racist and fostering equity. Being anti-racist and fostering equity has a strong research base, indicating that people who are belittled, mistreated, discriminated against, and insulted because of

their race and/or ethnicity are very negatively affected.[22] Such experiences arise from structural inequities and are associated with academic, social, emotional, and economic disparities.[23] One way that organizations that serve young people of color ensure that they are not continuing or compounding the negative effects of racism and inequity is to train staff on personal bias, identity, and historical and contemporary racism. This kind of training assumes that those who implicitly or explicitly engage in racist practices need to understand racism and how their biases and actions affect others, and works to build the capacity of staff and leadership to discuss racism and its effects. Organizations engage in other practices to ensure equity, such as disaggregating program data to see if youth from all backgrounds are benefitting from services, hiring staff with similar backgrounds as their youth participants, thinking intentionally about who is being served by their programs, and giving youth participants opportunities to give input and creating a safe space within which youth can speak up. Work at Child Trends explicitly distinguishes practices that promote racial equity and inclusion from other practices, such as PYD, noting that programs need to specifically focus on being anti-racist and address both explicit racism and implicit racism.[24]

As mentioned, a frequent contextual correlate of trauma and racism are socioeconomic disadvantages. When they co-occur, the implications can be particularly burdensome. Accordingly, Domus is focused on addressing how these harmful experiences are expressed in youths' thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

Addressing thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Reflecting harmful experiences of trauma and racism, many youth and young adults manifest feelings and behaviors that undermine their forward movement in education and work settings. Again, preventing such problems is preferable for youth and society. However, because of trauma, systemic racism, and socioeconomic disadvantages, many young people come to Domus dealing with varied adverse experiences across settings and over time, and these experiences affect their behaviors and emotions. Education, therapy, counseling, and group discussion can address these manifestations. Domus uses the TEB framework, an adaptation of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) that can be used by trained non-clinical staff to build skills among participants through interactions with staff in varied and some relatively informal settings. There is substantial evidence for the efficacy of CBT in improving young people's self-regulation.[25,26] While we are not aware of a formal evaluation of TEB, it is similar to CBT, which has been evaluated many times and found to be effective.

Positive youth development. Considerable research indicates that positive reinforcement (e.g., praise) is more effective than negative reinforcement or punishment.[27] Research finds that positive reinforcement has larger and longer lasting effects on increasing desired behaviors. Accordingly, positive reinforcement is recommended for parents and increasingly for programs.[28,29] Several decades ago, programming for youth focused on providing information about various risks, such as substance use and teen pregnancy, with modest effects.[30] Scare tactics were also employed, but negative evaluations have discounted this approach. Service provision was added to interventions; for example, drug treatment and contraception have been provided in programs. This is useful, but information and services alone were not sufficient, as impacts were quite modest. Gradually, service providers, followed by the research community, came to understand that positive, respectful, supportive relationships need to be part of the mix and positive outcomes need to be assessed. The field of PYD was born and has increasingly been accepted.[31,32] There is evidence that PYD interventions in schools lead to improved self-confidence and positive socioemotional behaviors.[33]

The PILOT[34] tool, developed by Child Trends, building on positive youth development research and experience, identifies ways to incorporate PYD concepts into workforce settings for young adults. Each letter in PILOT represents a PYD characteristic:

- ***P**ositive relationships* are defined as supportive, caring, affirming, respectful, and reliable.
- ***I**mproved skills* include setting goals and encouraging and helping youth develop both hard and soft skills.
- ***L**inkages* help participants connect and network with one another and staff and encourage recognition of connections to family, neighborhood, other programs, and community.
- ***O**pportunities to contribute and belong* emphasize ways for all participants to take initiative, demonstrate leadership, give back to their community, and feel like a part of the program and the community.

- ***T**rustworthy and safe settings* are programs that provide a supportive, professional, positive, and constructive setting that promotes emotional and physical safety for persons of all racial, ethnic, gender, religious, and sexual orientations.

Domus staff are trained in the components of the Domus Relational Model, which is vital to helping youth build the skills they need to achieve their goals: providing trauma-responsive care to youth and ensuring that youth feel safe; maintaining an anti-racist and equity centered program that actively recognizes and addresses the challenges that youth face; encouraging a spirit of generosity, belonging, and agency through PYD; interacting with youth so they feel genuinely loved and cared for by implementing the program with an emphasis on love; and emotional and self-regulation skill building using a psychology-responsive cognitive behavioral approach.

Domus School Engagement program

Overview of the School Engagement program

The Domus School Engagement program provides youth who are disengaged from school with intentional, intensive, and supportive one-on-one relationships with Domus' Family Advocates throughout their four years in high school. The School Engagement program aims to recruit 9th-grade students (incoming, repeat, or those referred in the first quarter of the school year) who "have an attendance rate between 50 and 85% and/or who have been suspended, arrested, expelled, or have documented externalizing behaviors." By fostering supportive relationships among School Engagement participants and their Family Advocates, the program intends to build youths' socioemotional skills, positive attitudes about school, and effective habits that allow them to graduate high school and either attend and persist in post-secondary education or secure and maintain unsubsidized employment, on a path to self-sufficient income. The primary vehicle to help young people build these skills is the intensive, loving relationships that the program's Family Advocates develop with students, through which they deliver TEB skills as foundational to others.

The School Engagement program currently serves about 400 students across three high schools in Stamford. Domus typically recruits youth as they enter ninth grade and engages them throughout their four years in high school. Youth enrolled in the School Engagement program have lower attendance rates in middle school (between 50% and 85%) than other students. In addition, youth who are enrolled tend to experience other difficulties at school, including suspension, expulsion, justice system involvement, or externalizing behavior problems. At times, Domus enrolls some youth who fall slightly outside of these criteria, and it will, for example, occasionally enroll students after ninth grade. However, all youth who fall outside the School Engagement criteria will fit within Domus's target population, since the overall Domus target population is slightly broader in terms of age and experience than the School Engagement program.

Program implementation happens across three high schools in Stamford: Westhill High School (Domus Vikings), Stamford High School (Domus Knights), and the Anchor School, an alternative school for overage and under-credited youth attended by Domus participants who transfer from Westhill or Stamford. About 18 Domus staff work across the schools, with the majority working at Westhill High School and Stamford High School. Family Advocates maintain a caseload of about 25 students. While there are slight differences in the built environment, culture, and populations served by the different schools, this largely does not affect the implementation of the program. Upon high school graduation, youth typically enroll in postsecondary school or find a full-time job, and a few enroll in Domus' workforce development program, DomusWorks.

As noted above, the program centers on relationship building between the Family Advocate and the youth. This relationship building occurs regularly in weekly face-to-face, one-on-one meetings. In these meetings, the young person and the Family Advocate may address stressors that the youth is experiencing and teach or model interpersonal and communication skills, including TEB skills. Family Advocates also interact with students outside of weekly meetings by providing youth with transportation to or from school, walking

them to class, texting or calling them, utilizing teachable moments, or supporting them at after-school activities. Trust and relationship building takes time and effort; staff are affable yet persistent and agentic in youth outreach and engagement.

In their relationship building and advocacy, Family Advocates also keep an open line of communication with their students' larger network, including teachers, families, and other Domus and school staff. Family Advocates meet weekly with teachers to discuss and troubleshoot any issues, since Family Advocates are not in the classroom. Similarly, Family Advocates communicate with students' families to keep family members informed and ensure that the youth's needs are met outside of school. Family Advocates often help with the basic needs of the youth and their family, which can include connecting students and families to existing resources (like SNAP, rental or utility assistance, or other resources available within the community) or providing the family with the needed resource directly (such as a gift card to a local grocery store or assistance purchasing college textbooks and supplies). Family Advocates may also work closely with school psychologists and counselors when possible and necessary. Also, Family Advocates may mediate conflicts between students (including, sometimes, students who are in the school but not on their caseload) and use restorative justice practices to address conflicts in partnership with school staff, such as school resource officers and staff of other Domus services, such as the Juvenile Review Board.

When it comes to participant tracking and data entry, Domus' procedures are closely aligned with the organization's philosophy and the Domus Relational Model. For example, when youth are recruited and enrolled, they are not given an intake assessment. Once young people are determined to meet the eligibility criteria, there is no need to further assess their status. Domus employs Salesforce as their data entry system to track participant information. Staff track obstacles based on a list of ACEs and urban ACEs and input them as they arise or come up in conversation (obstacles need not be recent or current). Within Salesforce, staff also track each touchpoint they have with youth. Staff are expected to have 30 minutes of contact with students per week, connect with at least one teacher per week, and make one family connection per month. In addition, staff track student attendance, credits, on-time promotion (calculated automatically in Salesforce based on credits), suspensions, attendance incentives, qualification for reduced dosage because they are doing well, and graduation status while the youth are in the program and in school. After graduation, staff track whether the student is working or in school at six months and one year.

The Domus team provides School Engagement staff with comprehensive and regular training sessions to learn and practice the skills vital to their roles and to deepen their understanding of the components within the Domus Relational Model. Trainings cover a range of relevant topics, including recognizing anxiety in teens, supporting non-binary youth, and preventing drug overdose. Incorporating regular trainings on staff roles and expectations highlights the growth-focused culture prevalent among the Domus staff and across the organization.

Review of research on School Engagement approaches

Numerous interventions have sought to improve academic success among students, ranging from preschool through high school. Below, we summarize several relevant programs that have been studied. Many programs have improved school performance through interventions such as tutoring, but unfortunately, many have failed to improve educational outcomes.[35] Again, as with PYD, a learning process led educators to recognize the non-academic issues faced by students from families with low incomes, and from schools and communities that have high concentrations of disadvantage and disinvestment, undermine their academic success. A student who is homeless, experiences violence, is hungry, or needs eyeglasses, for example, will face challenges focusing on their schoolwork. Accordingly, models have evolved to address these needs. The goal of these models is to increase youths' academic success, and practitioners recognized that both academic and non-academic inputs are needed to achieve that goal. Communities in Schools (CIS) is an early example of a model that aims to affect academic outcomes by addressing a child, family, and community's needs holistically.[36] Other examples are City Connects and the Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR) model.[37]

As noted above, research has established that the core components of the Domus Relational Model are evidence-based. It is also useful to acknowledge the research base that supports the use of these principles in school settings.

For example, research has outlined how having **supportive relationships** with non-parent adults (including teachers, members of a young person's community, and mentors) can positively influence a young person's school attitudes, motivation, self-competence, and school attendance.[38,39] Domus characterizes loving relationships between staff and students by a sense of feeling seen, heard, and affirmed.

Trauma has been increasingly recognized as an impediment to learning and to development more generally. Given the widespread prevalence of youth who have had traumatic experiences including "violence, crime, or abuse in their homes, schools, and communities," it is important that staff in Stamford schools (and elsewhere), where youth spend much of their time, have the awareness, training, and confidence to appropriately support young people with a **trauma-responsive approach** so that young people can succeed emotionally, socially, and in turn, academically.[40,41]

The majority of students in the School Engagement program are young people of color.[42] Accordingly, running the school engagement program with an **anti-racist and equity-focused approach** is critical and goes hand-in-hand with being trauma-responsive and ensuring that youth feel like they are safe when they are at school.[43,44] It is important for staff to be aware of the historical context of racism in schools (and in society at large) and actively maintain anti-racist practices.

Empowering youth through **PYD** is particularly important to the outcomes of the School Engagement model, which focuses on building the self-regulation skills and social behaviors among youth that support school success, as opposed to only targeting academic outcomes. Additionally, the scientific evidence behind PYD interventions in schools has found that its implementation leads to outcomes that are important to Domus youth and staff, such as improved self-confidence and positive socioemotional behaviors.[45]

Finally, training staff in TEB emotion regulation skills, which have their basis in **CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Theory)**, allows staff to demonstrate positive, evidence-based coping strategies to youth.[46] The School Engagement program aims to assist youth towards regular attendance, grade promotion, and graduation. Many Domus youth face systemic barriers to active engagement and connection in school. CBT techniques can be effectively used in schools to help youth identify and manage their emotions and stay on track despite the barriers and obstacles they may face.[47]

In addition to considering the individual elements of the model, it is important to recognize the evolving evidence base supporting the implementation of an academic model that combines academic with socioemotional components—the **Integrated Student Supports** (ISS) model, an approach commonly used in full-service community schools.[48]

Child Trends has twice assessed the research and evaluation evidence base for this school model. These detailed reviews note that there have not been random assignment evaluations of ISS schools (i.e., studies in which student outcomes in a sample of ISS schools are compared with student outcomes in a sample of schools that were randomly assigned to not implement an ISS model). However, Child Trends' reviews have highlighted the deep alignment between the ISS model and research and theory on child and youth development. Specifically, the *ecological model* emphasizes the importance of varied levels of influence, ranging from the child's characteristics to the family, school, community, and public policies. The *life course model* highlights how development proceeds over time, such that early influences affect later development and well-being. Also, the *whole-child perspective* notes that developmental outcomes are interdependent—that children's health, social skills, and emotional well-being affect education, and vice versa, that school success affects socioemotional well-being. Based on research and evaluation, as well as input from practitioners, Child Trends identified five elements of an ISS model:

- Needs assessments
- Coordination of supports for students
- Integration of supports within schools

- Community partnerships
- Data collection and tracking

While the Child Trends reviews found initial evidence of effectiveness, the review concluded that stronger evaluations are needed. Recently, several additional evaluations have been completed. The BARR model "allows staff to better understand and build on students' strengths, proactively address the non-academic reasons why a student may be falling behind in school, and identify what resources they need and steps they can take to thrive."[49, 50] Thus, it seeks to address educational, social, and emotional concerns; and the program has reported improvements in student test scores and scores on math and reading tests.[51] A random assignment evaluation conducted among ninth graders in 66 schools found impacts on absenteeism and the percentage of students who passed core classes, especially among boys and students of color.

City Connects also has a holistic model that is provided to individual students and draws on community resources. Across several studies using varied methods, City Connects reports achieving improved attendance, better grades, and increased student academic effort, as well as reductions in dropout rates and higher levels of postsecondary achievement.[52, 53]

Communities in Schools (CIS) has also done multiple evaluations, with somewhat mixed results.[54] The CIS model provides services to all students in a school and more intensive services to those who need sustained support (5% to 10% of students).[55] Since all students are exposed to the model at some level in the CIS schools, the 2017 evaluation compared outcomes across the entire CIS student body with those of the entire student body in the comparison schools.[56] A quasi-experimental study of 14 CIS high schools compared with 18 matched high schools found that dropout rates declined, and on-time graduation rates increased in both the CIS and the comparison schools. Another quasi-experimental study of CIS reported, "After two years, … case management had a positive effect on several non-academic outcomes, including students' attitudes about school and their relationships with adults and peers. However, the study also found that case management did not improve students' school progress, achievement, attendance, or behavior."[57]

A random assignment study at the school level would be a stronger methodology. One small-scale study in Chicago found positive impacts, but a large-scale randomized control trial (RCT) has not yet been conducted.[58]

In sum, the theoretical and research base for the ISS model is strong, and available evaluation results are encouraging, but a definitive evaluation has not yet been conducted. The Domus model shares several similarities with these other intervention approaches, especially its recognition that social and emotional competencies foster academic success. Because the five competencies in the Domus model go beyond the supports and services in these other models, the Domus model may represent an important step forward.

The DomusWorks program

Overview of the DomusWorks program

Preparing youth ages 17 to 26 who are disconnected from sustainable full-time employment with benefits is a central goal of Domus, and it is implemented through the DomusWorks program.[59]

The DomusWorks program enrolls young people ages 17 to 26 who are unemployed or underemployed. While working in the organization's internally run social enterprises, young people receive supports and develop the skills required to succeed in employment. Once participants are determined to be "work-ready," based on scores on a work readiness assessment, they seek external employment. DomusWorks staff stay in contact with young people for the first six months of their new employment, checking in regularly to help address barriers and provide ongoing support. Once young people have maintained employment for six months, they are "successfully exited" from the program.

Disconnected or disengaged youth are identified through various sources, ranging from probation officers and adult education staff, to referrals from organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs or internal referrals from other Domus programs, such as the School Engagement program. Youth join cohorts of about 12 members; DomusWorks aims for a 5:1 ratio of youth to staff. Participants begin the program with a two-week orientation during which they connect with other cohort members and staff and go through the first 15 modules of the DomusWorks training curriculum. Following orientation, participants work at one of Domus' social enterprises alongside their designated DomusWorks program staff person, who provides on-the-job coaching and support to improve work-readiness skills. Some social enterprises, such as a bakery and thrift store, are operated on-site at Domus's primary location; others leverage paid contracts the organization secures to execute facilities maintenance with different partners including the City of Stamford and local colleges and universities. Most projects involve physical labor, and most participants (about 75%) are men. Women have been less likely to apply, and this represents an area for expansion.

DomusWorks participants work on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, leaving Wednesday for training and one-on-one meetings with staff. Young people are paid minimum wage, about $17 for every hour they are at Domus as part of a DomusWorks social enterprise job. Staff coach participants and role-model appropriate work behaviors while working alongside participants directly. Staff members rate the participants using a daily outcome ladder to grade them on four behaviors: taking initiative, taking direction, being dressed correctly, and getting along with co-workers. Youth are given a score every day on all four measures. Staff have a conversation at the end of every day with young people about their scores and how to continue improving them. Every month, DomusWorks staff rate each participant on their work readiness assessment. Once a participant is deemed as work-ready on this assessment, they begin seeking employment outside of the Domus social enterprises. It typically takes between three and six months for a participant to become work-ready.

The goal is for youth to be on a path to self-sufficiency, defined as having a full-time job that provides benefits. Some of the jobs participants have gotten include landscaper, teaching assistant, mover, security guard, home healthcare aide, and restaurant manager, with an average hourly pay of about $18. For the first six months that the participant has their job, staff have weekly 30-minute check-ins to learn how things are going and identify and provide additional supports when indicated.

Review of research and evaluation studies on employment and training interventions

Evaluations of job training programs have been conducted over many decades, often with very large samples and rigorous methods.[60] Here, we provide a summary of impacts examined in meta-analyses across scores of evaluations, and we also highlight impacts from several recent interventions that employ a supportive approach to labor force preparation for disconnected and opportunity youth.

A 2015 meta-analysis summarized findings from more than 200 recent studies of active labor market programs. They found that: "(1) average impacts are close to zero in the short run but become more positive 2-3 years after completion of the program; (2) the time profile of impacts varies by type of program, with larger average gains for programs that emphasize human capital accumulation; (3) there is systematic heterogeneity across participant groups, with larger impacts for females and participants who enter from long-term unemployment."[61] The positive finding for people who have experienced long-term unemployment is relevant to Domus, as DomusWorks participants enter from non-employment, though, given their ages, it is unlikely to have been long-term unemployment.

While important, these impacts, which are averaged across varied populations and programs, are perhaps not as relevant to a program like DomusWorks, which has a highly supportive approach. A federal brief focused on PYD is more appropriate, as it describes two employment-related programs seen as illustrating a PYD approach—Youth Corps and Job Corps.[62]

Youth Corps combines paid community service work with educational supports, such as remediation, as well as work-preparedness and life skills training. The evaluation found that youth randomly assigned to the

treatment group had a higher probability of working for pay, worked more hours, and were less likely to be arrested compared to the control group.[63]

Similarly, *Job Corps*, a federally funded residential job training program for disadvantaged youth, provides a comprehensive array of supports to help youth develop and maintain employment. Results from a large-scale experimental evaluation of this residential employment training intervention found that youth who participated in Job Corps were more likely to earn a GED and a vocational certificate. They also found greater functional literacy and reported lesser involvement with the criminal justice system. While increases in short-term gains in earnings were found, these gains were sustained only among older participants.[64]

Another encouraging evaluation examined the Promotor Pathway® program developed by the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC).[65] The initial random assignment evaluation examined outcomes among Latino immigrant youth and other youth of color who were struggling with housing, work, education, and risky behaviors.[66] Youth were either randomly assigned to meet regularly with a caring adult and navigator called a promotor, or to a control group that could only receive typical LAYC services. The promotor provided an ongoing, caring, and intensive relationship for 18 months and longer. The evaluation found positive impacts on whether youth reported having a special adult in their life and whether they were in school, but did not find an impact on work. Participants also had a lower likelihood of becoming a parent, especially among males and Latinos. Positive impacts were not found on substance use, delinquency, or self-efficacy. However, a follow-up phone survey conducted five years later with 186 former evaluation members (39%) found that youth who completed the program benefitted from a 6 percent increase in obtaining a high school diploma or GED, a 17 percent increase in job stability, and an average of $7,000 more per year earned when compared to the control group (youth outside the Promotor Pathway)."[67] They also worked more hours and had higher hourly earnings.

Year Up is a year-long, full-time program for young adults ages 18 to 24 who have a high school credential. It provides technical training and supports for six months, followed by six-month internships with major firms. For the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) study, Abt Associates evaluated Year Up's original program via a large RCT.[68] The evaluation found that Year Up sustained large increases in average annual earnings over a seven-year follow-up period. The gains reached $8,251 (a 30% increase in earnings compared with the control group) in the seventh year. And the cost-benefit analysis found $2.46 in net benefits to society for every $1 spent on Year Up. Large positive earnings impacts occurred in nearly all subgroups and local offices, although magnitudes varied.

An evaluation of *Project QUEST* followed randomly-assigned low-income adults in the program after 14 years. Participants were provided with educational, financial, and personal supports for work in healthcare jobs and were found to have substantially higher wages every year, starting in year 3, compared with those in the control group.[69]

Another supportive program, *Urban Alliance*, provides high school students at risk of becoming disconnected with training, an internship, and mentoring to help them succeed. A random-assignment evaluation found increases in several outcomes about two years after expected graduation, including high school graduation for males in the treatment group compared with males in the control group, and college enrollment and persistence for certain subgroups, particularly for males. Importantly, if participants completed the program, the odds of high school enrollment rose by 23 percentage points, twice the proportion of those who were offered the opportunity but did not complete the program. Also, although participation in Urban Alliance lowered the likelihood of having a job among males after a year, there was no impact after two years, leading the researchers to feel that the intervention "encouraged males to attend college, not enter the workforce, after graduating from high school."[70]

A common characteristic of successful models is that they are comprehensive programs offering intensive services and linking training with work. These evaluations provide optimism that DomusWorks might have positive impacts on employment and the path to self-sufficiency, given that, on average, evaluated programs have had small positive impacts, while *programs for unemployed, male youth, youth who complete the program, and youth in more supportive programs have larger positive impacts*.[71]

Evaluation Readiness Assessment

Conducting an evaluability assessment before an evaluation can help address problems that make program evaluations less useful and less successful.[72] Evaluability assessments can also identify the type of evaluation an organization is most ready for and/or what type of evaluation is most feasible given the specific context of the program; this is true even among strong, well-implemented, mature programs.

Formal quasi-experimental or experimental evaluations, in which an external evaluator collects and analyzes data on a program over a period of time (sometimes several years), are usually time-consuming and costly. And many formal impact evaluations – those that use rigorous methods to identify a comparison or control group to assess the causal impact of an intervention – do not find evidence that an intervention has impacted participant outcomes (i.e., findings are null). However, there are ways for organizations to prepare for a formal quasi-experimental or experimental evaluation, decide on the type of evaluation that is most appropriate or feasible, and set themselves up for success to improve the likelihood that an evaluation will find program effects or impacts.[vi] Additionally, because evaluability assessments provide information about what aspects of a program may need adjustment or course correction, they can be used by organizations for performance management or improvement purposes unrelated to evaluation.

Child Trends provided an initial preliminary assessment of Domus' readiness for a formal quasi-experimental or experimental evaluation of its School Engagement and DomusWorks programs in July 2024, six months into the Child Trends-Domus engagement, and again in January 2025, following an in-person site visit to Domus. Child Trends has conducted a final assessment, reflecting information gathered as of November 2025. All three assessments are reflected in Appendix A. Child Trends made its assessments based on conversations with Domus leadership, analysis of focus group and interview data, and analyses of program and outcomes data. The ratings presented in the evaluation readiness assessment rubric range from 1 to 4. Each number represents one of multiple types of ratings (i.e., evidence, accuracy, frequency), with 1 indicating a low level of readiness on that indicator (e.g., little evidence, infrequent occurrence) and 4 indicating a high level of readiness on that indicator (e.g., strong evidence, frequent occurrence).

Findings

Overall, Domus as an organization appears strong and well-positioned for a formal quasi-experimental or experimental evaluation (as indicated by ratings of 3 and 4 on most rubric items), although the School Engagement program is more ready for evaluation than the DomusWorks program, which was launched several years following the School Engagement program and, by design, serves fewer young people annually. The primary reasons that Child Trends recommends waiting to evaluate the DomusWorks program are that the number of participants is currently too small to power a rigorous evaluation, there is no clear comparison group, and there are some aspects of the program that are still being made more consistent in implementation.

Our overall conclusions about Domus' readiness for a formal quasi-experimental or experimental evaluation have been consistent since July 2024, although Child Trends' analysis of data from the site visit and dosage and outcomes analyses strengthened our confidence in the ratings and provided additional information to support each rating. Evaluation options that Domus might consider are discussed in the Recommendations section of this report.

[vi] We use the term "effects" to refer to findings from evaluations that use methods that have a comparison group but do not use random assignment or a comparable method. We reserve the term "impact" for findings from studies that use random assignment to create a control group, or that use rigorous methods to select a comparison group that gives a similarly high level of confidence that the comparison group is equivalent to the treatment group before the treatment group receives the intervention.

As discussed with Domus leadership throughout this project, there is no exact number of criteria or level of readiness on those criteria that guarantees that an organization will have a successful evaluation. Therefore, even organizations with high levels of readiness can improve and strengthen their programs and refine systems and processes to be better prepared for evaluation. Some key recommendations on how Domus could be in an even stronger position for engaging in an evaluation are listed here and further discussed in the Recommendations section.

- Talk to staff about the purpose of an evaluation and what their day-to-day will be like during an evaluation to assuage concerns and garner buy-in.
- Review with staff, and potentially participants and community members, the findings from Child Trends' analysis of dosage, outcomes, and implementation to identify where program implementation might be strengthened. In particular:
    - Discuss with School Engagement staff the challenges to delivering all three dosage components every month to identify additional supports needed to meet expectations.
    - Brainstorm with DomusWorks staff on how to attract more females to the program, or whether a change in the target population for the program is warranted.
    - Review findings about who is less likely to successfully exit each program, to identify potential drivers for program disengagement (and ultimately, unsuccessful exit), and how to address those factors.
- As tweaks to the program services are implemented, monitor data regularly to see if the expected changes take place (e.g., do more females enroll, does the percentage of participants getting the minimum dosage increase). DomusWorks staff are already engaged in this process by tweaking how they record job site attendance and reviewing quarterly attendance data to check for increases in the attendance rate.
- Before replicating DomusWorks to new cities, consider how recruitment will work in a new location where Domus is not already embedded in the community. The program currently lacks consistent recruitment strategies, which has not been a barrier in Stamford, but that may be difficult to replicate elsewhere.

Implementation Evaluation

The goal of the implementation evaluation was to understand and document what is happening in the School Engagement and DomusWorks programs. Two straightforward research questions were posed to guide the implementation evaluation:

- Question #1: To what extent is the Domus Relational Model being implemented in Domus programming as intended?
- Question #2: To what extent are DomusWorks and School Engagement being implemented as intended?

Approach. To answer these two questions, Child Trends analyzed Domus' program data and conducted interviews and focus groups with Domus leadership, leadership council, staff, and participants. Child Trends delivered a Preliminary Findings Memo (February 2025) and an expanded Implementation Findings Report (May 2025), which are included in this report as appendices.

Interview and focus group data were collected during an in-person site visit in August 2024. Child Trends staff talked with 18 Domus staff members (9 frontline staff, 3 program directors, and 6 members of leadership). Interviews included questions about:

- The Domus Relational Model,
- Domus' mission and goals,
- Staff-specific roles and responsibilities,
- Domus staffing, training, and supervision structure,
- Program goals,

- Data use,
- Program and organization sustainability, and
- Youth experiences in the program

In addition, four focus groups were held with 24 youth, with 16 youth representing School Engagement sites and 8 DomusWorks participants from multiple cohorts, discussing:

- Youth activities,
- Their experience in the program,
- Barriers,
- Relationships with Domus staff,
- The Domus Relational Model,
- Skills development, and
- Successes and challenges in participating.

Child Trends staff also attended four in-person trainings (Internal Sanctuary Training: 7 Commitments and Controlled Empathy; Restorative Circles; Positive Youth Development Trainings: Circle of Courage and the 4 Components; and Youth Safety Protocol and Confidentiality), visited a DomusWorks job site, and toured the Domus office.

Following the site visit, Child Trends staff analyzed the data and summarized findings using Dedoose, a qualitative analysis program, in two memos provided to Domus: a preliminary findings memo in February 2025 (see Appendix B) and a final memo in May 2025 (see Appendix C).

Findings. Key findings from the implementation evaluation include the following:

- Staff are bought into the Domus Relational Model, with a solid understanding and strong commitment to implementing its components in their work. Domus leadership report a noticeable change in staff understanding of the model since the rollout of the Domus Relational Model.
    - **Building loving relationships** is a foundational component for staff at Domus, with all staff sharing a strong belief in the importance of showing love in their roles. Staff also emphasized that building loving relationships enabled them to build the rapport needed to implement other aspects of the Domus Relational Model and the program.
    - **Positive youth development** is closely related to (and sometimes confused with) the concept of Love in the Relational Model; however, while staff sometimes struggle to describe PYD or identify instances where it's implemented, they are generally successful at implementing it. Throughout interviews and focus groups, staff organically discuss examples of Positive Youth Development and its components (such as the Circle of Courage framework, which includes belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity); however, when directly asked how they implement PYD, staff tended to answer less generally or defer back to the closely related component of loving relationships.
    - Many aspects of **Sanctuary** bubbled up when staff were discussing Domus as a trauma-responsive organization. Among the aspects staff mentioned many times are social responsibility (one of the seven commitments), community meetings, and safety plans. Staff shared that Sanctuary can be difficult for newer staff to understand and implement, but that it becomes more natural over time.
    - Staff discussed the **anti-racism and equity** component as a participant-directed topic, rather than something staff "implement" individually to all youth, though staff recognize anti-racism and equity as paramount to the mission and values of Domus as an organization. At the same time, staff noted that applying these skills "on the go" can be challenging during fast-paced environments and interactions. For example, Domus staff shared that some family advocates talk to young people about civic engagement and help them register to vote; however, this is not a documented component of programming, suggesting that it would be helpful to systematically incorporate such practices and provide them to all program participants. Staff also shared that anti-racism and equity are central training and booster topics for staff.

    - Staff reported using **TEB skills** regularly and described the pros and cons of each of the five discrete skills that are part of the TEB curriculum, emphasizing that different skills may be accessible to youth at different rates or in different situations. Staff often cited "Charge Up" as being helpful and easily applicable among different youth and in different situations.
- The DomusWorks program is a year-long program where participants learn about job expectations, build job skills, and gain job experience. Staff and youth emphasized the socioemotional aspects of the programing, sharing that the program is about more than obtaining employment. Youth expressed feeling loved, supported, and cared about by program staff, and discussed ways staff helped them grow personally and professionally towards employment. The model allows flexibility in implementation; Some participants may use a full year or longer to gain the competencies needed to become "work-ready" and be successfully exited, though others may exit sooner. The flexibility allows the program to be responsive to youth needs, which correspondingly yields variation in how long any given participant is engaged with the program and when participants are said to have successfully exited.
- The School Engagement program staff emphasized the importance of providing socioemotional support and then building long-term relationships with youth as essential to the improvements their young people attain in school attendance along with their high school graduation outcomes. Staff and youth across all sites both reported interacting face-to-face very regularly, suggesting that many staff exceed dosage minimums. Youth confirmed feeling supported, loved, and accepted by staff, and received a variety of different supports from staff, including socioemotional support, academic support, interpersonal support, and support with barriers.

Outcomes Evaluation

The purpose of the outcomes evaluation was to help Domus (a) further its understanding of the extent to which program participants have experienced the intended outcomes and (b) understand the extent to which program components and participant characteristics are associated with outcomes.

The outcomes evaluation focused on four guiding questions:

- Question #4: Are participants achieving the short-term outcomes as expected?
- Question #5: Are participants achieving the medium-term outcomes as expected?
- Question #6: Are participants achieving the long-term outcomes as expected?
- Question #7: Are some participants achieving better outcomes than others?

The outcomes evaluation was primarily descriptive, as we did not collect data from a comparison group or seek to compare participants to youth who are not receiving services. However, analyses of dosage examined whether participants who received the intended dosage had better outcomes than those who did not receive the intended dosage.

The analyses were conducted using a sample of 590 School Engagement and 120 DomusWorks participants who were served between August 2017 and April 2025. These are DomusWorks participants who were enrolled on/after August 2021 and School Engagement participants who enrolled on/before January 2024. Child Trends conducted descriptive analyses (e.g., looking at averages, minimums, and maximums at a point in time and over time) and statistical testing (e.g., testing differences between groups of participants, changes over time in outcomes, and associations between dosage and outcomes). Because the DomusWorks program enrolls cohorts of approximately 12 participants, the data file contained too few participants to conduct statistical testing for some differences or associations.

Here we outline the key findings for both programs. The full results of the analysis are in Appendices D, E and F. Recommendations based on these findings are in the Recommendations section.

DomusWorks key findings

- Case management is consistently delivered throughout the phases of the program.
- Social enterprise job site attendance during the Skill Building and Employment Ready phases appears to be low, below the expected four days a week.
- Most participants are Employment Ready by six months into the program.
    - Participants who experience more obstacles, and specific obstacles related to violence, incarceration, or caregiver relationships, take longer to reach Employment Ready status.
- Of the participants who have left the program, 65 percent successfully completed, 14 percent had a neutral exit (e.g., moved away), and 20 percent unsuccessfully exited (see Table 1).
    - Excluding the participants who leave the program for a neutral reason that is unrelated to their engagement in the DomusWorks program, 76% of participants successfully completed the program and 24% did not (see Table 1).
    - Participants who face more obstacles, and those who have illness-related obstacles, are more likely to unsuccessfully exit.
    - Successful exiters have their first proficient assessment earlier than those who unsuccessfully exit—at 2.3 months versus 4.4 months, on average.
    - Most participants who leave unsuccessfully do so within 12 months of enrollment.
- Of the 28 youth who successfully completed the program at least a year prior to this analysis, 96 percent were still employed full time one year after leaving the program.

Table 1. DomusWorks participant exit status

Exit status	Number	% excluding neutral	% including neutral
Successful	55	76%	65%
Unsuccessful	17	24%	20%
Neutral	12	—	14%
Total	84	100%	100%

School Engagement key findings

- Most participants get the minimum face-to-face minutes during most (67%) of their months in the program.
- However, many don't get at least the full minimum dosage of face-to-face *and* family engagement *and* teacher connections.
- Of the participants who have left the program, 54% successfully exited, 19% unsuccessfully exited, and 27% exited for a neutral reason (e.g., moving to a different school district).
    - Excluding the participants who left the program for a neutral reason unrelated to engagement in the program, 74% successfully completed the program and 26% did not.
- Of the 109 students who successfully exited from the program at least a year prior to this analysis, almost all (90%) still had a full-time job or were enrolled in school/training one year after graduation.
- Face-to-face services are associated at the 95% confidence level with higher attendance and consistent grade promotion but are not associated with suspension.
- Teacher connection and family engagement services appear to have some association with more negative outcomes in the short term, which may reflect that young people struggling the most have the greatest need for these additional services as Family Advocates endeavor to support them.

Table 2. School Engagement exit status

Exit status	Number	% excluding neutral	% including neutral
Successful	185	74%	54%
Unsuccessful	65	26%	19%
Neutral	94	—	27%
Total	344	100%	100%

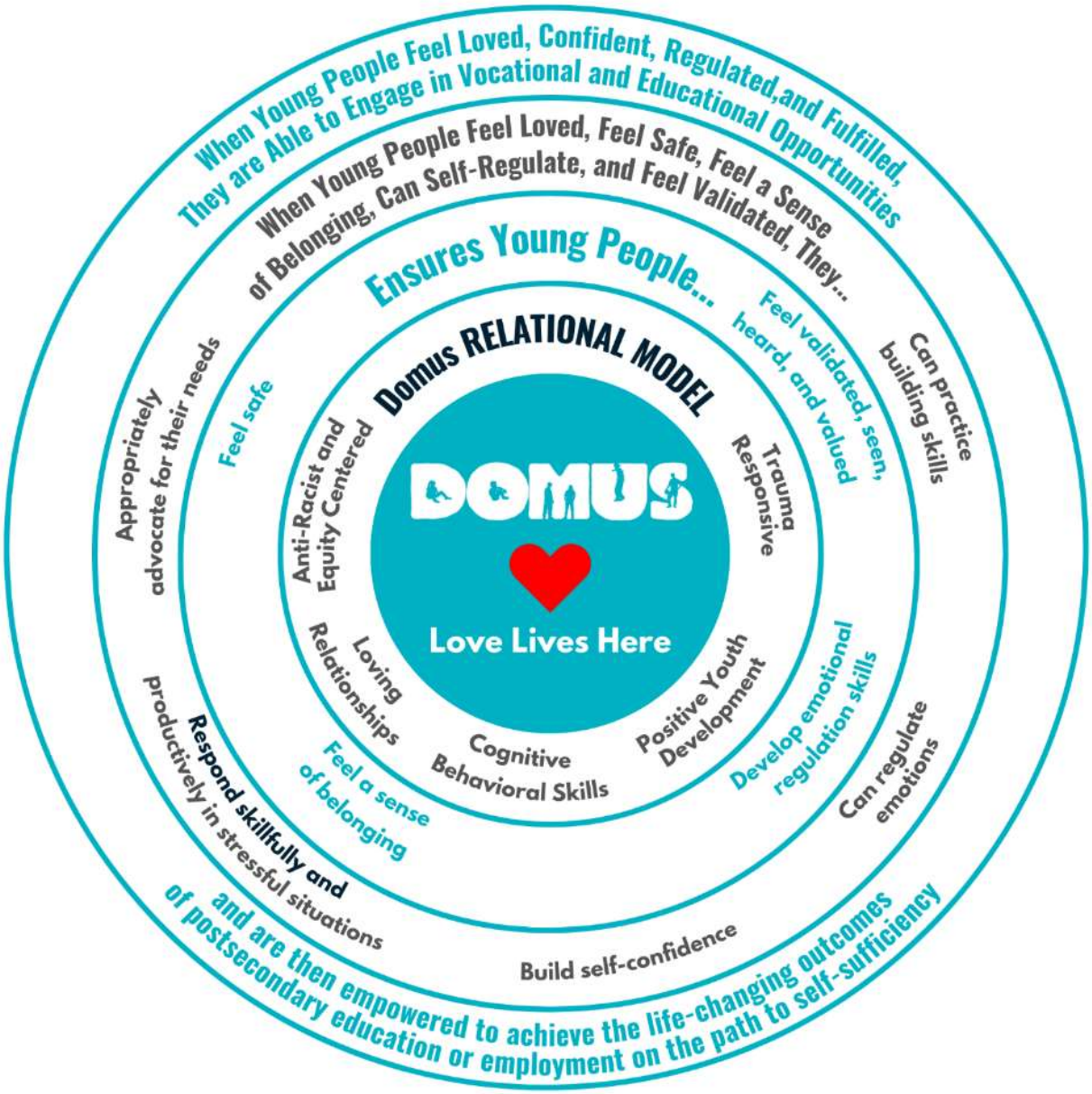
Relational Model Survey Development and Analysis

One of Child Trends' recommendations following the first phase of our engagement with Domus was to develop an evaluation logic model to augment the program logic model and to begin measuring the outputs and outcomes in that logic model. The evaluation logic model is more detailed than the overall program logic model; in particular, it identifies the short-term outcomes that Domus expects from implementing the Relational Model. Child Trends worked with Domus over several months to develop an evaluation logic model for the DomusWorks and School Engagement programs; to identify constructs related to the Domus Relational Model, to draft survey questions based on the logic model; and to program, field, and analyze the developed survey. This survey is intended to have long-term utility for Domus, as a tool for conducting an annual assessment of participants' progress in the School Engagement and DomusWorks programs.

Development of evaluation logic model & measures

Child Trends and Domus engaged in an iterative process to identify the outcomes that Domus expects from its Relational Model and develop the evaluation logic model that depicts those outcomes. First, Child Trends worked with Domus leadership to identify an initial logic model that posited a causal process using "if, then" statements to link participant changes in a chain from left to right in a diagram. Domus leadership instead suggested a model (see Figure 1) of concentric circles that radiate from the center, with the center being a core component of the Domus Relational Model (the inputs), the surrounding circles representing outputs and short-term outcomes, and the outermost circle representing the long-term program goals. At the center of the model is the core program input—Love. Moving outward, the middle circles aim to identify questions like how youth experience love, safety, and support from Domus staff members, and how having those feelings may change or modify their behavior. The third circle represents the program outcomes—how changes in behavior lead to outcomes for participants.

Figure 1. Domus Relational Model



Next, Domus sought input from every level of its organization, from the leadership council to frontline staff to define more specifically the outcomes that they expect for participants. At the request of Domus, two Child Trends staff members traveled to Stamford to explore the constructs that Domus sees as critical to implementing its model and the outcomes sought for participants. During the two-day logic model sessions, staff members identified numerous constructs reflecting their goals and practices. These constructs were written on stickies and posted on the wall within the concentric circle logic model for discussion. Child Trends compiled and aggregated notes from these sessions to consolidate and organize the constructs that might be measured and draft an evaluation logic model (see Appendix G). Child Trends and Domus leadership then prioritized and winnowed down the list of constructs to be measured. Throughout the process, Domus leadership obtained additional input from staff. After several rounds of

Domus leadership and staff review, a set of key constructs was defined, and items were developed to assess each construct.

Survey question development

Because Domus already has data on academic progress for participants in the School Engagement program and data on employment and income for participants in DomusWorks, the surveys for each program focus on the social and emotional competencies of participants. To help Domus gather data on the key constructs of interest, the Child Trends team drafted sample questions (some from previously tested scales) based on the constructs developed with Domus. Alongside Domus, and after several rounds of review, Child Trends developed a survey with 42 questions measuring 15 constructs. Domus then programmed the survey using the online survey platform Form Assembly, enabling participants to complete it on a cell phone, computer, or other electronic device.

To ensure that the survey questions were clear and understandable to Domus participants, Domus fielded the survey to a small number of DomusWorks and School Engagement participants and Child Trends conducted in-person and virtual interviews, asking respondents to share their interpretations and questions about survey items (see Appendix H; note that items may have been further revised after the decisions documented in Appendix H).

Based on this input, additional revisions were made to the wording of questions, and several different response options that are appropriate to the varied types of questions were developed. Once these updates were made, Domus sent the survey to all DomusWorks and School Engagement participants to further pilot it. Responses were obtained from 166 students in the School Engagement program and 45 youth in DomusWorks. Domus plans to conduct the survey among incoming ninth graders and repeat the survey annually among all students.

Psychometric Analyses of Survey Data

Child Trends analyzed the survey data to assess whether the survey items (i.e., the survey questions) were measuring the constructs (i.e., broad outcome domains such as problem-solving skills) that they were developed to measure. This process was done separately for each program and used multiple methods, including examining the distribution on each item (that is, how many respondents selected each response option for each question), re-assessing each item's "face validity" (whether the items make sense as a measure of a given construct), and testing the proposed scales for each construct. To test the scales, we assessed *alphas* (i.e., measures of the correlations among the items in the scale) and conducted exploratory factor analysis to see how well the items "hang together" as a measure of a given construct. When well-performing construct scales were identified from these analyses, we created summary measures for each construct by averaging the responses to the individual items in the scale (see Table 3 for a list of items within each construct's scale).

School Engagement program analyses

Nearly all of the School Engagement items were found to fall into the intended constructs, though several items were revised or combined, and several were dropped. The measures and final constructs are shown in Table 3 below. As shown in Table 4, the alphas are good to very good for the School Engagement constructs. Terms in parentheses after the items wording (*frequency*, *agreement*, or *like me*) refer to the set of response categories used for the item:

- Frequency: None of the time, some of the time, half of the time, most of the time, all of the time
- Agreement: Do not agree at all, only agree a little, somewhat agree, mostly agree, completely agree
- Like me: Not at all like me, a little like me, somewhat like me, a lot like me, just like me

Table 3. Overview of School Engagement survey constructs and measures

Confidence and determination
1c. I am able to speak up for myself. *(Frequency)*
6d. I can do the things I set my mind to. *(Frequency)*
1d. When I have a problem, I have a hard time asking for help. *(Frequency)*
2b. I do not think I will be able to do the things I want to do in the future. *(Agreement)*
3g. I am confident that I will be able to solve problems I face in my future. *(Like me)*
4g. I do not see solutions for the problems I am facing. *(Frequency)*
4h. I can finish the things I am determined to do. *(Frequency)*
6e. I have little control of things that happen in my life. *(Frequency)*
Decision-making, problem-solving
3a. I am open to other ways of doing things. *(Like me)*
4b. I try new ways to solve the problems I face. *(Frequency)*
6c. I make decisions that will help me reach my goals. *(Frequency)*
3e. I enjoy making plans and getting things done. *(Like me)*
5b. I have learned to make good decisions and stick with them. *(Like me)*
Perseverance
4c. When I am in a difficult situation at school, I know how to work through it. *(Frequency)*
5c. If at first I cannot do something I care about, I keep trying. *(Like me)*
5d. My belief in myself gets me through hard times. *(Like me)*
5f. I do what I believe is right, even if it is hard. *(Like me)*
6a. If there are people who do not like me, I still show up to school and do my best.
Aware of emotions, feelings
3d. I can identify emotions that I am feeling. *(Like me)*
3f. When I am at school, I can "pause" in difficult situations to understand the situation better. *(Like me)*
5a. When I am angry, I am able to calmly describe my feelings. *(Like me)*
5e. I can tell when I am getting stressed. *(Like me)*
Self-regulation
1f. Before I make a decision, I think about the consequences. *(Frequency)*
1h. I can control my temper when I am frustrated. *(Frequency)*
3b. When I am upset, I can figure out how to calm down. *(Like me)*
3c. I think before I act. *(Like me)*
Social relationships and teamwork
1b. When I work in a group at school, I do my part. *(Frequency)*
1g. I am able to work well with others to solve problems. *(Frequency)*
2f. I know how to build positive relationships with other people. *(Agreement)*
4a. My friends help me to do well. *(Frequency)*
4d. My friends and I encourage each other to be the best we can be. *(Frequency)*
6f. I have people in my life who I trust. *(Frequency)*
Standalone measures
2e. I plan to complete more education after high school. *(Agreement)*
2c. What I do will make a difference in my community. *(Agreement)*

Positive Domus-related changes
2a. Being at Domus has helped me understand the world beyond my community. *(Agreement)*
2d. Domus has taught me how I can change my life for the better. *(Agreement)*
2g. Domus has helped me see ways I can help others in my community. *(Agreement)*
Positive experience at Domus
1a. I can count on Domus Staff to be there for me. *(Frequency)*
1e. I feel I am loved at Domus. *(Frequency)*
4e. I feel emotionally safe at Domus. *(Frequency)*
4f. Domus staff listen to me when I have something to say. *(Frequency)*
6b. I feel like I belong in the Domus community. *(Frequency)*

Table 4. Overview of alphas for School Engagement survey constructs

Construct	Alpha
Positive experience in Domus	0.87, very good
Positive changes from Domus	0.84, very good
Self-regulation	0.80, good
Aware of emotions, feelings	0.75, good
Decision-making & problem-solving	0.81, good
Confidence & determination	0.65, acceptable
Social relationships & teamwork	0.78, good
Perseverance	0.78, good

Several additional questions were written and included to assess participants' views of Domus services and staff. The responses were very positive, and Child Trends found that these questions comprised two constructs: youth's experiences at Domus and youth's perception of how their Domus experience had changed them.

Participants' responses to the Relational Model survey indicate a generally favorable status across all of the constructs of interest. As described above, we started the analysis of each construct by calculating scale scores—the average response across all items in a construct. Each item was scored from 1 to 5, with 1 representing the least favorable response possible to an item and 5 representing the most favorable response possible. For example, if a participant replied "All of the time" [5] to one item and "Most of the time" [4] to another item in a two-item scale, their scale score across those two items would be 4.5.

There were five constructs where School Engagement participants had median scale scores of at least 4 (out of 5), indicating that over 50 percent of participants had average scores between the two most favorable possible response options in that construct. Two of these constructs were the items about Domus. These constructs were: *Positive experience in Domus* (median score: 4.80) and *Positive changes from Domus* (median score: 4.33). In addition, three outcome constructs were quite positive: *Perseverance* (median score: 4.20), *Social relationships and teamwork* (median score: 4.17), and *Decision-making and problem solving* (median score: 4.0). The three remaining constructs (*Aware of emotions and feelings*, *Self-regulation*, and *Confidence and determination*) all had median scale scores of 3.75, meaning that 50 percent of participants had average scores of at least 3.75—between a middle-of-the-road response and the second-most-favorable response.

Since survey respondents may have been enrolled in the School Engagement program for a short, medium, or long time, these analyses of the scale scores are not an indication of whether participants are achieving

the intended outcomes (because we would expect that students who just started the program would have lower scores as they are just being exposed to the program and are newly developing the skills being measured). Instead, they serve to assess the distributions and reliability at a point in time. Future iterations will provide information on how participants are doing on outcomes over time. Table 5 below shows the range of scores on each construct scale and provides the percent with the highest possible score as well as the percent in the top two response categories.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for School Engagement Relational Model constructs

Construct	Min	Mean	Median	Max	Standard deviation	Prop. averaging in top two response categories	Prop. with highest possible scale score	No. of respondents
Positive experience in Domus	2.00	4.51	4.80	5.00	0.65	83.03%	43.03%	165
Positive changes from Domus	1.67	4.21	4.33	5.00	0.80	70.30%	32.12%	165
Aware of emotions, feelings	1.25	3.75	3.75	5.00	0.82	43.03%	14.55%	165
Self-regulation	1.50	3.78	3.75	5.00	0.85	45.78%	14.46%	166
Decision-making and problem-solving	2.20	3.96	4.00	5.00	0.73	54.55%	14.55%	165
Perseverance	2.20	4.09	4.20	5.00	0.66	65.45%	13.94%	165
Social relationships and teamwork	2.00	4.15	4.17	5.00	0.66	68.07%	11.45%	166
Confidence and determination	2.50	3.73	3.75	5.00	0.56	34.94%	1.20%	166

DomusWorks program analyses

Child Trends also analyzed the DomusWorks data and found somewhat different constructs than in the School Engagement data. Notably, the DomusWorks sample was significantly smaller, so alphas for each scale were lower overall. Additionally, two constructs—Social Relationships and Teamwork—that showed promise in the School Engagement survey (meaning the survey items were correlated and appeared to measure the same underlying concept)—were not statistically significant for DomusWorks. This is likely because of the older ages of DomusWorks youth (who are interacting with peers and friends in different settings and from a different developmental stage) and the different settings in which teamwork skills are being developed in the program (on a job site vs. in school). Child Trends worked with Domus to develop several suggestions about how the survey could be edited to increase the precision of these constructs, such as anchoring the questions more closely to the DomusWorks experience. New items on Friendships/Relationships and Teamwork were developed and added to the DomusWorks survey. Other

construct scales had good or at least acceptable alphas. A summary of the survey constructs and measures (Table 6) and alphas from the psychometric analyses (Table 7) for DomusWorks is below.

Table 6. Overview of DomusWorks Survey Constructs and Measures

Confidence and determination
1c. I am able to speak up for myself. *(Frequency)*
6c. I can do the things I set my mind to. *(Frequency)*
3g. I am confident that I will be able to solve problems I face in my future. *(Like me)*
4h. I can finish the things I am determined to do. *(Frequency)*
Decision-making, problem solving
3a. I am open to other ways of doing things. *(Like me)*
4b. I try new ways to solve the problems I face. *(Frequency)*
3e. I enjoy making plans and getting things done. *(Like me)*
5b. I have learned to make good decisions and stick with them. *(Like me)*
Perseverance
4c. When I am in a difficult situation at work, I know how to work through it. *(Frequency)*
5c. If at first I cannot do something I care about, I keep trying. *(Like me)*
5d. My belief in myself gets me through hard times. *(Like me)*
5f. I do what I believe is right, even if it is hard. *(Like me)*
7b. If there are people at work who do not like me, I still show up and do my best.* *(Frequency)*
2c. What I do will make a difference in my community. *(Agreement)*
Aware of emotions and feelings
3d. I can identify emotions that I am feeling. *(Like me)*
3f. When I am not at Domus, I can "pause" in difficult situations to understand the situation better. *(Like me)*
5a. When I am angry, I am able to calmly describe my feelings. *(Like me)*
5e. I can tell when I am getting stressed. *(Like me)*
Self-regulation
1f. Before I make a decision, I think about the consequences. *(Frequency)*
1h. I can control my temper when I am frustrated. *(Frequency)*
3b. When I am upset, I can figure out how to calm down. *(Like me)*
3c. I think before I act. *(Like me)*
Friendships/relationships
1d. When I have a problem, I have someone I can ask for help. *(Frequency)*
2e. I have someone I can count on. *(Agreement)*
4a. I have someone who will help me when I'm down. *(Frequency)*
4d. My friends trust me. *(Frequency)*
6e. I have someone who will give me good advice. *(Frequency)*
Teamwork
7b. If there are people at work who do not like me, I still show up and do my best.* *(Frequency)*
1b. When I work in a group, I do my part. *(Frequency)*
1g. I am able to work well with others to solve problems. *(Frequency)*
7a. I show respect for people I work with. *(Frequency)*

7c. My supervisor at work trusts me. *(Frequency)*
7d. I do not get along with the people I work with. *(Frequency)*
7e. At work, I pitch in to help others succeed. *(Frequency)*
Agency
6b. I make decisions that will help me reach my goals. *(Frequency)*
2b. I do not think I will be able to do the things I want to do in the future. *(Agreement)*
6d. I have little control of things that happen in my life. *(Frequency)*
4g. I do not see solutions for the problems I am facing. *(Frequency)*
Domus-related items
1a. I can count on Domus Staff to be there for me. *(Frequency)*
1e. I feel I am loved at Domus. *(Frequency)*
4e. I feel emotionally safe at Domus. *(Frequency)*
4f. Domus staff listen to me when I have something to say. *(Frequency)*
6a. I feel like I belong in the Domus community. *(Frequency)*
2a. Being at Domus has helped me understand the world beyond my community. *(Agreement)*
2d. Domus has taught me how I can change my life for the better. *(Agreement)*
2f. Domus has helped me see ways I can help others in my community. *(Agreement)*

*Flagged for both Teamwork and Perseverance

Table 7. Overview of alphas for DomusWorks survey constructs

Construct	Alpha
Domus-related items	0.71, good
Self-regulation	0.77, good
Aware of emotions, feelings	0.65, acceptable
Decision-making & problem-solving	0.68, acceptable
Perseverance	0.73, good
Confidence & determination	0.87, very good
Agency	0.65, acceptable
Social relationships	TBD
Teamwork	TBD

Similar to analyses of the Relational Model survey for School Engagement participants, we analyzed responses to each DomusWorks construct using calculated scale scores (Table 8). DomusWorks participants had very positive responses to most constructs. With the sole exception of the *Agency* construct, all others had median scale scores greater than 4.0, meaning that half of respondents had scale scores (the average of all the items in the construct) that were between the top two response categories (such as between agree most of the time and agree all of the time). In three constructs—*Domus-related items*, *Perseverance*, and *Confidence and determination*—more than 90 percent of participants had scale scores equivalent to the second-most-favorable response or higher. Tracking these measures over time will provide Domus with new and valuable information about outcomes, benefits, and the participant experience. Domus intends to administer the DomusWorks survey to participants at three key time points (at the end of orientation, at the end of the first three months when most participants are deemed work-ready, and at successful exit once participants have held a non-Domus job for six months).

Table 8. Descriptive statistics for DomusWorks Relational Model constructs

Construct	Min	Mean	Median	Max	Standard deviation	Prop. averaging in top two response categories	Prop. with highest possible scale score	No. of respondents
Domus-related items (positive experience, changes)	3.88	4.73	4.88	5.00	0.29	97.78%	28.89%	45
Aware of emotions, feelings	3.00	4.32	4.25	5.00	0.50	84.44%	24.44%	45
Self-regulation	1.75	4.37	4.50	5.00	0.61	84.44%	17.78%	45
Decision-making and problem-solving	3.20	4.40	4.40	5.00	0.43	86.67%	13.33%	45
Perseverance	3.20	4.51	4.60	5.00	0.41	95.56%	20.00%	45
Confidence and determina-tion	2.00	4.62	4.75	5.00	0.55	91.11%	42.22%	45
Agency	2.00	3.34	3.25	4.75	0.82	28.89%	0.00%	45

Comparison Data

For several reasons, having comparison data for a national or state sample or for comparable samples of youth would be helpful for an initial assessment of outcomes for the Domus program. One reason is to assess whether levels of social and emotional well-being are higher among Domus participants than among similar youth in other surveys. Another reason is to compare subgroup differences. For example, are differences by sex similar in the Domus population as in the larger population of similar youth? Also, if longitudinal data were available, one could examine trends among youth in the Domus programs with trends in the general population. Studies generally find that emotional and social well-being tends to decline in the teen years; it would be valuable to find that Domus participants' well-being improves or holds its own as youth progress through their teen years.

There is data available on educational attainment, work, and earnings in reports from the Census Bureau, and the data can usually be examined for demographic subgroups, including age, race/ethnicity, sex, and urbanicity. However, our search for robust comparison data on the constructs uniquely central to the Domus model has been unfruitful. Specifically, there are no measures comparable to the Domus Relational Model survey measures in Monitoring the Future, the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), the National Survey of Children's Health, or the Fragile Families Study (which has been renamed the Future of Families & Child Wellbeing Study).

Monitoring the Future focuses on substance use and problem behaviors among high school students. YRBSS focuses on health and risky behaviors, such as seat belt use and sexual activity. The National Survey of Children's Health is parent-report and therefore does not include measures of adolescents' perceptions.

The most promising survey is the Future of Families & Child Wellbeing Study, which oversampled births to unmarried parents in large cities and has followed these families from birth to age 22. It includes several standard negative social and emotional measures, such as behavior problems, delinquency, mental health, depression, substance use, anxiety, and depression. There is one promising positive measure, EPOCH,

which measures engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness; some of its items are similar to the Domus survey items, but they are only asked when the babies have reached age 15.

One school-based survey in Stamford is a possibility— DESSA (the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment). This survey covers several social and emotional competencies; however, it appears that the constructs and questions only minimally overlap with the Domus Relational Model survey constructs, which are intended to capture early changes activated by youth experiences in Domus.

Also, the four-year cohort graduation rates for the Stamford High School students who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals are consistently lower than the successful exit rates of Domus students who start at Stamford High School. These numbers fluctuate and are not directly comparable for several reasons,[vii] so they can only give a general sense of whether Domus' students' outcomes are better than their peers not being served by Domus. Similarly, data from the Boston Consulting Group's report *Getting Young People Back on Track* indicate that 77 percent of youth who have 4 to7 risk factors are disconnected from work and school after leaving high school; while only 10 percent of Domus School Engagement participants, who have experienced four obstacles on average, are not in school or working a year after graduating. This seems to be a substantial difference; however, the 77 percent of youth estimated in the *Getting Young People Back on Track* analysis includes youth who did not graduate from high school, whereas the Domus School Engagement participants completed high school. Therefore, while this is another generally helpful metric for contextualizing Domus' outcomes, it is not a directly comparable metric. On the other hand, the survey measures were developed specifically for Domus to meet its needs, and accordingly, even generally comparable measures for similar populations are not available.

In sum, the education and work outcomes can be compared to similar samples of youth in national studies or local data, although there is still unlikely to be a comparison that gives us sufficient confidence to make causal statements about the effectiveness of Domus' program. In Child Trends' view, this represents a reason for conducting a rigorous quasi-experimental or random assignment evaluation that incorporates a carefully chosen comparison group.

Recommendations

Child Trends has come to view Domus as a very engaged and caring organization, and the initial survey results suggest that participants feel the same way. Hence, Domus should continue to uphold its principles, its approach to staff recruitment and training, its positive and supportive engagement of participants, its regular collection of data, and its use of data to inform service delivery and assess outcomes. The recommendations we offer are intended to marginally improve programs that are aligned with available research and theory, well-managed, well-implemented, and data-driven, and that employ and train competent and caring staff.

Recommendations for data collection and analysis

Domus and Child Trends collaborated to identify survey items to measure participants' perspectives of Domus and their self-assessment of their well-being outcomes. Child Trends recommends that Domus

[vii] For example, Domus students likely have additional risk factors that would make them more directly comparable to a sub-set of students with a higher risk of disengagement than students who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. Additionally, the graduation rates provided by the school district are four-year cohort graduation rates – the percentage of students in a 9th grade cohort who graduate within four years – whereas Domus' success rates are the percentage of students who start in a cohort – which may happen in either 9th or 10th grade – who successfully exit the program within some number of years; the students who unsuccessfully exit Domus may go on to graduate from high school but Domus does not have data on those students.

administer the surveys developed for School Engagement and DomusWorks participants annually, or more often, if desired. As sample sizes become larger, Child Trends recommends Domus:

1. Reassess the psychometric quality of the scales on an ongoing basis.
2. Conduct additional analyses to assess the extent to which participants' outcomes improve over time. Reorder survey items periodically to reduce participants' familiarity with the items.
3. Consider including additional items as the programs continue to expand. For example, several constructs identified by staff as important outcomes were not prioritized for inclusion in the pilot survey. New items were developed for Friendships/Social Relationship and Teamwork; as sample sizes accumulate, psychometric analyses can examine how the new items are working.
4. If changes in responses over time are not found, consider whether some scales are overly positive and introduce some additional questions to improve the distribution of items.
5. Merge data about program services with survey data to assess whether and to what extent certain services are associated with improving participant outcomes over time.

More analysis of the program data collected will be valuable for both outcome assessment and program management. Similarly, survey data provide insights into participants' views about Domus, as well as information about their outcomes. Data from a single survey assessment provide information about the strengths youth have and issues they are experiencing. Data collected from youth over time can provide insight into whether strengths are increasing over time as they continue to participate in Domus. This means that the data are useful for assessing both inputs and outcomes, and it highlights the value of having complete data and high response rates.

Given that many evaluations have found that initial improvements fade over time, longer-term follow-up of participants would provide new information on the persistence of the initial gains achieved.

As part of ongoing data collection and monitoring, Domus should consider engaging participants and community members to provide input on outcomes, data, and evaluation needs, and defining program outcomes. For example, Domus might hold sessions with participants and their families (as appropriate) to discuss plans and how they see themselves benefiting from the program, or hold data walks or other collaborative data interpretation sessions to share outcomes. Another example includes how Domus recently engaged participants to provide feedback on the Relational Model survey questions.

Finally, Domus should continue to periodically assess whether it is collecting the right data to understand whether the programs are being implemented with fidelity. Domus may want to review the evaluation logic model drafted with Child Trends to identify implementation measures (output measures) that are not yet being tracked. Domus might begin with output measures that are most closely tied to outcomes, that is, the measures of the most likely mechanisms through which activities are affecting outcomes – such as in-person contact between students and Family Advocates (assuming that this is an important way that students start to feel safe, feel they belong, and build positive relationships) and the quality of their relationship with their Family Advocate (because this relationship is essential to unlocking many of the social and emotional outcomes that Domus expects for its participants).

The above monitoring and evaluation tasks are ones the Director of Evaluation and Learning could consider once the Associate Data Manager has alleviated the Director's data management burden.

Program recommendations for the School Engagement program

As suggested in the Evaluation Readiness Assessment findings section, we recommend that Domus review the School Engagement dosage findings with staff. In particular, program leadership could discuss with Family Advocates the challenges they face in delivering all three dosage components (face-to-face minutes, family engagement, and teacher engagement) every month. Surfacing these challenges can lead to the identification of additional supports staff may need to meet dosage expectations, or it may help School Engagement leadership determine whether expectations should be adjusted.

Additionally, Domus might review findings about who is less likely to successfully exit with program staff, particularly those whose families have difficulty meeting basic needs. As Domus considers replicating the program at new sites, we encourage leadership and staff to consider differences in how the program is implemented at Westhill and Stamford, including which strategies and approaches are successful, what challenges staff encounter, and other contextual factors that affect implementation at the two schools. For example, there is some indication in the data that participant attendance rates differ between schools, which could be a data point to continually analyze, potentially informing capacity-building activities or serving as a topic of discussion during staff meetings.

Program recommendations for the DomusWorks program

Domus might seek to broaden the job settings where DomusWorks youth gain work experience. For example, the health sector might offer participants varied employment opportunities with good wages and prospects for upward mobility. We recognize that the Social Enterprise model limits the settings in which work experience can happen and that working in many health care occupations would not necessarily align with the group model. However, finding jobs in new fields such as the healthcare sector is worth exploring. Also, many of the skills that DomusWorks participants gain are not specific to a particular career but are general to work settings broadly, so exploring ways to expedite additional training for new fields seems warranted. The soft skills that align best with an individual's goals might develop more naturally in entry-level positions that are similar to the settings where they will seek long-term jobs.

DomusWorks might also work to engage more women into the program. One possible reason suggested by staff for the low enrollment among women is that the work available (e.g., landscaping, moving) is not of interest to them. While many young women might be pleased with the job settings currently provided, expansion into the health sector and other employment sectors could enhance the number and variety of work opportunities. Another possible explanation is that the current, informal recruitment process reaches primarily young men who are referred by friends or programs such as Invictus. If Domus expands its outreach, it could look for ways to more proactively recruit young women.

Domus leadership should review the analysis findings with staff on who is less likely to be successful in the DomusWorks program. These conversations can surface challenges and opportunities that aren't apparent in the data and may point to ways to support these participants sooner or using a different approach. For example, Domus might identify services that would enhance and extend engagement for youth in DomusWorks who are affected by ongoing illness (their own or a family member's) or other substantial obstacles. A first step would be to discuss with staff and leadership the findings that youth with more obstacles and youth with an ongoing illness obstacle are less likely to be successful. In this discussion, staff can generate hypotheses about why this occurs and what specific challenges those youth face, focusing on identifying barriers that the program can help overcome or strategies to support full engagement. This might include consideration of work settings that do not pose barriers for young people with health issues and whether additional support services are needed to address mental or physical health challenges to enable those youth to more fully engage in the program. For example, counselors might engage with youth to identify the obstacles they face and develop more individualized plans to enhance their likelihood of success.

Domus should continue to gather information on the job benefits participants receive when they become employed and consider expanding the information collected for past participants. Obtaining this information could be a useful task for an associate data manager. A definition of a good job or reasonable wage for their region or community would set a common goal, although Domus may want to consider whether this expectation would vary if the young person is in school or working part-time and whether they want to be accountable for that outcome.

Recommendations for future evaluation

Child Trends' final assessment of Domus' readiness for formal impact evaluation aligns with what we have heard from the Domus leadership: the School Engagement program is ready to take the next steps in evaluation, while the DomusWorks program needs more time. For example, the DomusWorks program is still in the process of solidifying and making its program model consistent and does not have a sufficient sample size to power a rigorous evaluation. While Domus can accumulate sample and monitor change over time with the DomusWorks survey, this will take time. Therefore, these recommendations focus on the evaluation of the School Engagement program.

Prior to embarking on an evaluation, Domus leadership can prepare staff by talking about the purpose of evaluation and what staff members' roles and responsibilities will be if the organization goes through an evaluation. Child Trends didn't assess how staff feel about evaluation, so the leadership might want to explore this with staff.

Given that many evaluations have found that initial improvements fade over time, longer-term follow-up of participants would provide new information on the persistence of the initial gains achieved.

More analysis of the program data collected would also be valuable. Program data are valuable for both outcome assessment and program management. Similarly, survey data provide insights into participants' views about Domus, as well as information about their outcomes. This means that the data are useful for assessing both inputs and outcomes and highlight the value of having complete data and high response rates. Integrating the survey and program data to identify factors associated with youth outcomes would maximize the utility of these data.

Data from a single survey assessment provide information about the strengths youth have and issues they are experiencing. Compiling and analyzing data collected for youth over time can provide insight into whether strengths are increasing over time in Domus. Child Trends reviewed national (and other) surveys to assess whether comparison data might be available, and found limited and largely non-comparable options, indicating that available representative data will not provide a ready comparison population.

Domus should consider conducting a quasi-experimental design (QED) study of the School Engagement program, collecting academic and perhaps survey data from non-participants from the Stamford school system. Such a study would examine the predictive validity of the Relational Model survey data and whether/how the survey data augments program data. This would provide initial information about whether Domus students are experiencing stronger growth over time and better educational outcomes compared with similar students who are not served by Domus. This would require formulating a data-sharing agreement, obtaining consent to access this information, as well as a plan to make the data anonymous and confidential. Conversations with staff in the Stamford school system indicate that this is a real possibility.

A Random Assignment Evaluation? Assuming findings from the QED are assuring, Domus might also consider the possibility of conducting a random assignment evaluation to compare students who are randomly assigned to the School Engagement program with students who are not randomly assigned to the program. It appears there are more students in the target population in Stamford and Westhill High Schools than are being served, which could mean there is enough demand for the program that random assignment to the program or a control group would be possible.

A positive RCT indicating desired impacts on outcomes for students would facilitate expansion and funding and provide evidence about the importance of the Domus approach for other communities and funders. However, we recognize that this would be a difficult design because random assignment of students within a school means the students attend the same schools and may sit in the same classrooms, which might dilute the strength of the random assignment. Having acknowledged that, analyses reported here indicate that students who receive more supports from Family Advocates have stronger short-term outcomes than students who have less time with Family Advocates. This suggests that being in a classroom together is less important than receiving the Domus services, suggesting that random assignment might be effective. We recognize that denying services to students who would be eligible but who are randomly assigned to not

receive services may not be acceptable to the school, community, or Domus, though it is possible that it might be necessary in case of funding cuts or if expansion takes place in such a way that not all students can feasibly be served at first. In addition, such an evaluation is expensive and places demands on staff time, suggesting careful consideration of the potential benefits relative to the costs.

Replication. As we have noted above, the Domus model design is well-aligned with research and evaluation studies, and therefore, the model seems like a good candidate for replication in other locations and communities. Expansion to new communities represents a possibility that could make it more feasible to rigorously evaluate the model, if expansion increases the size of the population served, and/or if a gradual expansion could incorporate an evaluation. For example, it might be possible to implement the Domus School Engagement model in a number of randomly selected schools, comparing outcomes for youth in those schools with outcomes for youth in comparable schools that have not yet implemented the Domus model. We note, however, that it may be prudent to conduct a QED study before deciding to expand substantially or initiating a random assignment evaluation.

Final recommendation

The School Engagement and DomusWorks programs will, we anticipate, warrant replication in other cities in the future. Therefore, we recommend that Domus prepare a brochure and a handbook for each program, to facilitate replication in other locations.

About Child Trends

Child Trends is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to improving the social and economic well-being of children, youth, and young adults, and their families. For more than 45 years, policymakers, practitioners, funders, and community leaders have relied on Child Trends' rigorous research, evaluation, and unbiased analysis to inform decisions about practices, programs, systems, and public policies that affect young people.

Child Trends conducts applied research and evaluation across the full developmental spectrum, with subject-matter expertise spanning youth development, education, early childhood, juvenile justice, and child welfare. Research staff are organized into dedicated program areas that combine deep topical knowledge with strong methodological expertise, allowing research and evaluations to be tailored to the goals, populations, and contexts of the programs being studied.

The organization partners with federal, state, and local agencies, foundations, and nonprofit organizations on a wide range of projects—from focused implementation studies and continuous quality improvement efforts to large-scale, rigorous impact evaluations, including randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental designs. This breadth of experience supports research and evaluations that are both methodologically sound and practical for real-world settings.

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