

Key Considerations for Serving Disconnected Youth

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This paper provides a description of the youth population that is disconnected from education and the workforce and describes a set of key considerations for improving outcomes for this population. Programmatic examples that demonstrate how effective supports for youth look in practice are discussed. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for serving youth at the federal, state and local levels.

The following key considerations are examined:

- 1) Engaging disconnected youth on a trajectory to graduation and beyond requires the use of data to understand student needs and to inform the creation of multiple options matched to these needs.
- 2) Educational pathways for disconnected youth must ensure that learning is relevant to careers, academically rigorous and adaptive to individual students.
- 3) Cross-sector collaboration and resource-sharing is essential to building and sustaining the network of services that support disconnected youth.

Introduction

Nearly all jobs in the emerging economy in the U.S. will require youth to earn both a high school diploma and some type of a postsecondary credential to develop the appropriate skills and training for family-sustaining employment. In order to move disconnected youth along the path toward high school graduation and postsecondary training, a comprehensive system of supports that extends beyond just academics is necessary. The process of developing the knowledge, skills, abilities and personal resources required for success is complex, and the path will be different for each young person as they navigate the interrelated systems that provide opportunities for learning and growth. Policymakers and community members must be committed to a vision of serving this population by aligning resources to support young people as they access opportunities across these systems. The education and training opportunities available must reflect the needs of a community's youth population, with a range of providers offering learning options matched to these needs.

According to a new report by the EPE Research Center, our nation's public schools had a graduation rate of 72% in 2008, meaning that nearly 3 out of every 10 students failed to earn a diploma.ⁱ Many students who drop out of school remain persistently disconnected from both education and productive employment. One study conducted by Andrew Sum of Northeastern University has found that the average number of 16-24 year olds disconnected from both school and work at a given point in time is, 5.2 million, or 16.4% of all youth.ⁱⁱ The picture becomes increasingly dire when we consider the data by socioeconomic group. Youth from low-income families are

particularly likely to be disconnected from school and work between the ages of 18 and 24; only 44% of these youth remain connected to either school or the labor market, compared to 67% from middle-income families and 75% from high-income families.ⁱⁱⁱ

The population described as “disconnected youth” or “out-of-school youth” encompasses a large range of individuals that represent a heterogeneous group. These individuals have differing levels of skills and preparation for academic and career-oriented training opportunities and are often faced with multiple obstacles to being prepared for the job market. The disconnected youth population includes young people who might be over-age and under-credited for high school graduation, have insufficient academic skill levels to complete credits necessary for graduation, have been involved with the criminal justice system, or have financial obligations that require them to work.

Key Considerations

Key Consideration #1: Engaging disconnected youth on a trajectory to graduation and beyond requires the use of data to understand student needs and to inform the creation of multiple options matched to these needs.

Because this population is diverse in its age, skill level, career interests, level of motivation and goals for education, programs must be targeted and responsive to their needs and interests. Providing multiple pathways to high school graduation enables youth to choose an approach to education that matches their needs. However, before appropriate programming can be designed and implemented it is incumbent upon communities to do a deep analysis of its youth population in order to identify particular needs, patterns and persistent challenges and to create programming matched to these characteristics. This thorough understanding, based on data, can help communities develop the capacity to provide comprehensive systems of support that extend beyond academics and provide multiple re-entry points to an educational trajectory.

New York City is exemplary for its data-driven programming serving disconnected youth and has differentiated educational options by specific needs identified in the city’s youth. In order to develop an appropriate portfolio of options, a detailed segmentation analysis was conducted by the New York City Department of Education to assess the characteristics of the over-age and under-credited population in the city and to determine how the city’s system could be adapted to better meet their needs. The research included development of profiles of the target groups, which included a range of information such as age and credit attainment of the 140,000 students identified as over-age and under-credited. The New York City Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation used this information to establish new and enhanced schools and programs that connect students ages 16-21 to high school graduation and college and career opportunities. The Multiple Pathways to Graduation initiative uses data on an ongoing basis to ensure that the pathways in place continue to match the changing needs of the city’s young people. Current options in New York City include:

- Transfer High Schools—small, academically rigorous high schools with personalized learning environments that support students not promoted on grade level with instructional and developmental goals and a focus on connections to college;

- Young Adult Borough Centers—supportive learning environments that allow under-credited students to focus only on the credits needed for graduation through a block schedule, paired with additional services such as job placement and career and college counseling;
- Access GED— full-time GED programs that include age and culturally appropriate curriculum, contextualized learning opportunities and workforce preparation opportunities such as pathways to postsecondary training and employment; and
- Learning to Work—a workforce preparation component integrated at the city’s transfer schools, Young Adult Borough Centers and some GED programs that uses community-based partners to provide intensive employability skills development, subsidized internships, college and career counseling, job placement and a range of other academic, mental health and youth development supports.^{iv}

At the federal level, the Department of Education’s focus on the 5% of schools with the lowest performance, which include the bulk of the nation’s dropout factories, encourages different models that are often successful with disconnected youth. Districts have the opportunity when implementing reforms to turn around these chronically under-performing schools to make drastic changes and enable educational pathways that match the needs of their young people.

[Key Consideration #2: Educational pathways for disconnected youth must ensure that learning is relevant to careers, academically rigorous and adaptive to individual students.](#)

Preparing youth for success requires not just meeting traditional education expectations, but also contextualizing learning in applied settings that demonstrate the connection to jobs and foster workforce readiness. In one study of high school dropouts, 81% of those surveyed said making classroom experiences more relevant via real-world learning opportunities would have kept them engaged.^v Many young people who attempt to re-engage in education after slipping off-track have spent time in the labor market or are currently working and desire meaningful learning experiences that directly connect to job advancement. The education and training opportunities that are most successful with older youth and non-traditional students offer credit for a range of learning opportunities that teach the knowledge and skills necessary to progress to graduation and beyond, and in some cases provide opportunities to learn through paid work. Relevant learning may enable students with the necessary skills and maturity to re-engage in high school or GED preparation while simultaneously accumulating postsecondary credits or progressing toward an industry-recognized certification.

In addition to making education relevant, it is equally critical to ensure academic rigor in all educational settings so that all youth are prepared for the challenges of postsecondary education and careers. Academic content in alternative education settings must be aligned to the same standards as traditional education, though the content delivery may be unique. The success of relevant and rigorous programming also hinges on the responsiveness of options to the scheduling needs of the off-track youth population.

Many youth who re-engage in education have responsibilities and time demands such as family caretaking or employment that limit their ability to learn within a traditional school schedule. For these young people, flexibility of scheduling and the ability to take advantage of learning beyond the traditional school day and classroom setting is essential. Rather than a required amount of time to be spent on task as in traditional classroom settings, successful alternatives include learning opportunities in afterschool, weekend, and summer hours as well as job-based learning.

Many programs are blended learning models which enable course content to be delivered through both in-person and online learning, allowing for students to learn at times suited to their needs.

Students reconnecting to education pathways may also have partially completed coursework or achieved mastery in some content areas, and return to school with specific gaps in knowledge that need to be addressed in order to progress. These learners may be best served by proficiency-based systems that more flexibly allow credit accumulation for mastery of measurable competencies. Rather than credits awarded based upon the number of hours spent on a particular subject area, proficiency-based (also called “competency-based”) approaches enable progress toward graduation for students who can demonstrate proficiency or mastery of course standards through any number of validated assessment mechanisms.

Improved Solutions for Urban Systems (ISUS) in Dayton, Ohio has created small, technical schools based on the concept of “high school plus” where dropouts ages 16-24 can earn a high school diploma or GED, in addition to industry credentials and college credits. Programming at ISUS is well-matched to student needs, as the curriculum is competency-based and not based on Carnegie units. Students spend approximately one-third of their time on academic subjects, one-third on technical training, and one-third on hands-on field work.^{vi} Youth engaged in ISUS programs receive training by industry-based professionals in high-demand fields such as manufacturing technology, healthcare and renewable energy. ISUS created the first of its three dropout recovery and career and technical schools in 1999. Ten years later, two of these schools were among the top five highest performing public schools in Dayton.

Nationally implemented programs such as YouthBuild and Job Corps, both federally funded, successfully combine academic re-engagement with job skills training and serve youth on a broad scale. In addition to core academic and vocational competencies, such programs integrate an emphasis on leadership development, community service, and other social competencies in an environment with supportive adults and youth committed to success.

[Key Consideration #3: Cross-sector collaboration and resource-sharing is essential to building and sustaining the network of services that support disconnected youth.](#)

The range of comprehensive supports and academic services that youth benefit from in multiple pathways models reach across agencies, systems, sectors and providers. Also, multiple providers in communities, each with different missions and strengths in serving youth, often provide many of the same services to the same population, creating redundancy. This web of support might include the separate but overlapping responsibilities of education, job training, substance abuse and mental health, juvenile justice and other youth-serving functions. When these inter-related functions reach across systems, the successful engagement of young people depends upon how well coordinated the range of efforts are and how these efforts reinforce one another. Cross-system collaboration avoids duplication of efforts, allows community-wide resource sharing and enables public systems to maintain a more comprehensive understanding of how the needs of youth are being met. In order to foster a climate of shared responsibility and accountability for youth outcomes, youth serving agencies and organizations need to be able to flexibly combine funding streams that ultimately serve to support positive youth development and readiness for adulthood.

A city-wide focus on disconnected youth in Philadelphia through Project U-Turn, which serves 5,000 out-of-school and disconnected youth through a portfolio of options, has engaged multiple agencies and systems serving youth. Project U-Turn is led by a citywide collaborative that includes representatives of the school district, city agencies, foundations, youth-serving organizations,

parents and young people themselves. Philadelphia’s multiple pathways approach includes a re-engagement center at the Central School District headquarters, as well as an Education Support center housed at the Department of Human Services. At the re-engagement center in Philadelphia, 16-21 year old students have a one-stop center to help them navigate to the programs and services that fit their needs in both education and beyond, including employment services and childcare. Counselors at the center are able to access records from several related agencies to enable their support of youth across multiple domains.

Several federal initiatives provide resources that help create responsive, collaborative systems. The Promise Neighborhoods Program is one example of how communities are utilizing federal funding to enhance capacity to support young people by integrating resources across different agencies and sectors. Additionally, the White House Office of Community Solutions is committed to improving outcomes for disconnected youth and is exploring how resources can best be combined and maximized.

Policy Recommendations

Policies at all levels can support the conditions that help move more youth to high school Completion and to postsecondary education and training. Following are five policy recommendations based on the key considerations for serving disconnected youth:

Create a comprehensive agenda that is responsive to the needs of youth.

Elected officials must have the political will to coordinate resources and take a comprehensive approach to serving youth through an articulated agenda and strategy. This comprehensive youth agenda must be based on the specific needs of youth in the community and support diverse pathways to graduation and training.

Ensure broad stakeholder engagement in supporting youth across agencies, organizations and sectors.

Because the comprehensive network of supports for vulnerable youth reaches across the domains of multiple stakeholders, the policymaking process must also engage these diverse groups. In addition, to ensure that young people are prepared for jobs matched to the current economy, businesses and labor groups such as chambers of commerce have a role to play in shaping policy, as do community-based organizations, parents and youth themselves.

Enable flexibility around educational delivery and crediting so that programming can be responsive to student needs.

States and districts must allow for “anytime, anywhere” learning where students can acquire content and skills through non-traditional schedules and beyond the classroom, including work-based experiences and training opportunities from diverse providers. Flexible crediting policies at the state level are essential to allowing youth to accumulate credit for these experiences, as well as to support competency-based approaches through which students advance based on demonstrated proficiency in academic areas, rather than based on seat time.

Recognize the unique considerations for accountability, assessment and measurement of progress for youth who have disengaged from the traditional education trajectory.

Measuring progress for vulnerable youth necessitates using multiple measures and indicators of success, beyond what may be tracked for traditional students. Communities, districts and states need to develop robust longitudinal data management systems that monitor expanded indicators

across youth-serving programs and agencies, as well as provide data for accountability. Early detection of risk factors and academic behaviors linked to dropout risk enable educators in K-12 systems to target interventions to students while they are still engaged in educational settings. Finally, state and federal accountability policies must be mindful not to provide disincentives for schools to enroll students who are below proficiency in core academic areas and are at risk of dropout. Another policy strategy is to encourage states and districts to measure and report extended graduation rates (five- and six-year graduation rates) as a way to encourage schools to serve dropouts.

Allow flexibility in use of funding streams to support youth access to programs across multiple systems and sectors.

In order to strengthen the web of comprehensive academic and social supports for vulnerable youth, federal policy should enable sharing of resources across state and local agencies, as well as the use of federal funds to support community-based organizations and agencies achieving demonstrated results with this population. State policy can support funding that may be used flexibly for multi-sector alternative education programs to re-engage dropouts. Further, a responsive state funding stream for youth services that follows the individual across systems would enable young people to more easily access the range of services needed to move them to graduation and self-sufficiency.

ⁱ EPE Research Center/Education Week. (May 31, 2011.). *Diplomas Count, 2011, Beyond High School, Before Baccalaureate: Meaningful Alternatives to a Four-Year Degree*. Available at:

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2011/06/09/index.html>.

ⁱⁱ Andrew Sum et al. (2003) *Left Behind in the Labor Market: Labor Market Problems of the Nation's Out-of-School, Young Adult Populations*, Boston: Northeastern University, Center for Labor Market Studies..

ⁱⁱⁱ Kent, Adam. *Vulnerable Youth and the Transition to Adulthood: Youth from Low-Income Families*. (2009). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. Available at: http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/411948_low_income_families.pdf

^{iv} New York City Office of Multiple Pathways. Fact sheet. Available at:

http://www.nyc.gov/html/ceo/downloads/pdf/appendixb_multiplepathways.pdf.

^v Bridgeland, J.M. DiJulio, J.J., Morison, K.B. (2006). *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises. .

^{vi} Martin, N. and Halperin, S. (2006). *Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.