



Reconnecting Opportunity Youth: Education Pathways

Although the vast majority of American youth successfully transition into adulthood, a growing number of young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 years are neither in school nor working. Referred to as disconnected youth, these young people lack the credentials (high school diploma, GED, technical or postsecondary education) and social networks that can help them establish productive lives. Without attachments to school or work, they are vulnerable to crime, violence, and poverty. These youth are also described as Opportunity Youth because of their potential value to our communities and economies. In the United States, the population of Opportunity Youth is on the rise. Recent studies estimate that of the 37.5 million Americans between 16 to 24 years of age, approximately 6.7 million (17 percent) are disconnected from both employment and the education systemⁱ.

Though the causes are numerous and complex, disconnection is often tied to failures within the education system. Many Opportunity Youth leave high school before they have obtained the skills necessary to succeed in postsecondary education or to connect to the workforce. Because effective solutions must be tied to the systems the youth are disconnected from, opportunity exists to reengage youth through education pathways.

Reaching an effective solution through education requires exploration and innovation by a diverse set of stakeholders connected to the problem. Education-focused efforts aimed at Opportunity Youth need to be comprehensive, youth-centered, flexible, and pragmatic. Successful interventions are those that encompass a multi-sector approach and link education to social services, mental health services, employment, and job training. This paper examines promising multi-sector strategies that have shown early signs of success in addressing the issue of Opportunity Youth.

Opportunity Youth are defined as young people ages 16 to 24 who are:

- *Not in school*
- *Not working or connected to the legitimate labor market*
- *Lacking strong connections to caring adults and community*





To and through Secondary Education

Nationwide, about 7,000 students drop out of high school every dayⁱⁱ. A student's decision to drop out of school is rarely the result of a single life event; oftentimes, warning signs manifest as early as elementary school. Emerging proactive strategies that address dropouts focus on students in elementary and middle schools. But early identification of students at risk of disconnection is only a first step. The key to preventing disconnection is developing the capacity of multiple sectors within the community to mitigate the risk factors and help students stay connected, graduate, and be prepared for college and careers. Communities must develop a collective commitment and belief that graduation rates can improve through the early, data-driven identification of potentially disconnected students and the application of diverse multi-sector strategies to address student needs..


Strive Partnership

Strive, a nonprofit in Cincinnati, provides an example of how multi-sector solutions can impact the issues preventing Opportunity Youth from success. Strive has brought together more than 300 local leaders from the business, government, social, secondary and postsecondary education, and nonprofit sectors to drive educational progress through collective impact, resource alignment, and data-informed decision-making. Stakeholders co-developed a common agenda, evaluation standards, and a communication platform consistent with the vision of improving the education system throughout greater Cincinnati and northern Kentucky. Strive's goals directly relate to the prevention and of and support for Opportunity Youth. Collectively, the members of the partnership aim to prepare every child for school; support children inside and outside of school; and ensure that every student graduates from high school with the skills and/or credentials necessary to succeed in postsecondary education or a career.

While the stakeholders who participate in Strive share a common agenda, their individual activities are not uniform. Instead, participants perform coordinated activities at which they excel and which support Strive's overarching agenda. All activities are informed by shared metrics. In the four years since its inception, the program has achieved impressive success. While Strive's goals resemble those of other organizations throughout the nation that have not made as much progress, Strive has been successful primarily because of the partnerships on which it was founded. By leveraging these partnerships, Strive's members have created more informed and comprehensive programs and policies, leading to more effective outcomes. Early on, stakeholders recognized that to solve such entrenched, systemic problems associated with Opportunity Youth they needed to set aside their individual agendas in favor of a collective approach.

Turnaround for Children

Turnaround for Children, a partnership between the social, education, and business sectors, operates in New York and Washington, DC. The schools in which the program resides are premised upon the principle that students distracted by significant personal conflicts need support to address their issues safely in order to be successful in all aspects of their lives. The program addresses the needs of the whole child and focus on



students' psychological and emotional well-being, in addition to academics. Because the program is located within schools, students who require additional social services do not need to travel far, and the school staff can build these activities into the students' schedules without causing disruption.


Turnaround for Children trains teachers to appropriately respond to classroom disruptions in productive ways, rather than yelling or asking the child to leave the classroom. The creation of Turnaround for Children was based on studies that revealed that the common default strategies schools use when dealing with troubled children are interventions that take students out of the classroom and away from instruction. These strategies included suspension, referral to special education, emergency room calls, and psychiatric hospitalizations, and cause further disengagement for students already on the verge of disconnection.

The San Francisco Wellness Initiative

The San Francisco Wellness Initiative, a partnership between the San Francisco United School District (SFUSD); the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth, and their Families; and the Department of Public Health, seeks to tackle root problems leading to youth disengagement and violence by improving the health, well being, and educational outcomes of San Francisco's high school students. The Wellness Initiative provides comprehensive, school-based student health programming focused on prevention and early intervention. In leveraging the resources of each partner agency, the Wellness Initiative allows the school district, city departments, and other community-based organizations to align and coordinate their efforts to address student health needs. Alignment across important sectors influencing youth health has also allowed the program to expand over a relatively short amount of time. The San Francisco Wellness Initiative is one of the first networks of high school-based health centers taken to scale in a school district. Demand for services continues to grow throughout the district. San Francisco Wellness Initiative centers are in 15 SFUSD high schools; they served more than 7,000 students last year (about 45 percent of the student population across these school sites). Each center is staffed with health outreach workers, a nurse, and behavioral counselors. A third-party evaluation of the program found that the program has successfully affected students' academic performance and emotional well being. As a result of participating in individual counseling services through Wellness Initiative programs, 81 percent of students reported attending school more often, 69 percent of students reported doing better in school, and 90 percent of students reported that there was an adult within the program who really cared about them.

While intervention programs targeting public school students are widespread across the country and have varied success, the impact of the Strive Partnership, Turnaround for Children, and the San Francisco Wellness Initiative can, in part, be attributed to the multi-sector approach that the programs use. Furthermore, by drawing on the strengths of a diverse set of stakeholders, these partnerships are able to resolve many different issues that prevent disconnect youth from attaining success, including academic and non-academic factors.

To and through Postsecondary Programs and Careers



America faces a serious skills gap and postsecondary completion crisis. Too many students graduate from high school unprepared for college and the workplace. During the 2007-08 school year, over one-third of all first-time college freshmen enrolled in non-credit bearing remedial coursesⁱⁱⁱ. Students required to take remedial courses are more likely to drop out before earning a degree. This reality has led to unsatisfactory retention and graduation rates among college enrollees. College affordability also continues to be a significant obstacle for students to enroll and graduate.


Increasingly, colleges and universities across the nation—many of whom are anchor institutions in their communities—are getting more involved in their communities and interested in the topic of youth development and alternative education. By virtue of their missions, colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to provide pathways to success for Opportunity Youth. Community colleges especially can play a critical role in reengaging Opportunity Youth by providing remediation programs and career-oriented, competency-based instruction. When partnered with leaders from the social and educational sectors, local colleges have even greater potential to positively impact at-risk youth. Bridge programs are designed to create comprehensive pathways for youth to and through postsecondary programs and/or employment opportunities. These programs can be both reactive and proactive in nature. Successful bridge programs incorporate strategic partnerships between education leaders at the secondary and postsecondary levels, as well as the employment and social sectors. Such partnerships allow students to access bridge programs through a variety of avenues to gain knowledge and experience that is relevant to their career aspirations, and to receive guidance on a range of topics and issues.

Back on Track

The Back on Track Through College model builds strategic partnerships to prepare Opportunity Youth for postsecondary education. The program supports the transition to postsecondary education and provides assistance to students during the critical first year of their postsecondary experience by addressing emerging problems before they reach crisis stage. The Back on Track model facilitates constant improvement along different stages—preparatory institutions and programs look to their postsecondary counterparts for indications of necessary skills that youth need to transition to the next levels seamlessly and successfully. Additionally, if students are not appropriately prepared for postsecondary coursework, postsecondary institutions provide feedback, giving the feeder programs an opportunity to tweak their lessons accordingly. These types of strategic, cross-sector partnerships have the potential to drive large-scale change in the education sector.

Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST)

Washington State's I-BEST program, a career pathway bridge program, contextualizes basic skills and English language content to the skills needed in specific occupations offers dual-enrollment systems that allow students to take basic skills classes required for entrance into most postsecondary programs and career-specific postsecondary classes simultaneously, provides administrative support and mentorship to students; and connects students to local employers through internships. While many social and educational programs employ one or two of these strategies, the impact of any one strategy or sector alone is often modest. The I-BEST experience provides evidence that such strategies that partner with business, secondary education, and



postsecondary education sectors have more impact when combined. A 2010 study of I-BEST conducted by Columbia University found that I-BEST students were 56 percent more likely than regular adult basic education and ESL students to earn college credit, 26 percent more likely to earn a certificate or degree, and 19 percent more likely to achieve learning gains on basic skills tests.

John Deere Technology Program

John Deere and Lake Land Community College in Mattoon, Illinois provide economic opportunities and social support to students as a result of a multi-sector approach. The career-based curriculum keeps students engaged in the program. Furthermore, John Deere offers students paid internships while in college and employs several graduates. Lake Land also launched the Transportation Bridge Course in 2010, which offers dual-enrollment in bridge courses and in Career and Technical Education programs. Instructors in the bridge program utilize technical materials, such as the John Deere manual, and work-based scenarios to teach basic skills like reading, writing, and communication. Students in the course are assigned a mentor with whom they are required to meet periodically to support their success. They also explore various educational options from certificates to Associate of Applied Science degrees and beyond. The program's benefits extend beyond students: the partnership helps the college engage students by keeping learning relevant. John Deere and other employers in the industry benefit from the program curriculum, which prepares students with necessary workforce skills before they enter the workforce. The community also benefits as a result of developing more skilled citizens who are connected to its education and employment systems.

Gateway to College

The Gateway to College program also utilizes a dual-enrollment approach, whereby high school dropouts enroll in community colleges across the country to gain the competencies needed to graduate from high school while accumulating credits toward a postsecondary credential. The Gateway to College program originated at the Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon and has been replicated at 29 colleges in 16 states. Students in Gateway are between the ages of 16 and 21 and attend classes on the college campus. The program pays for admission, fees, and books. Gateway to College uses public education funding and the college infrastructure to support the program. For example, Gateway to College in Philadelphia is based on a partnership between the Community College of Philadelphia and the Public School District of Philadelphia with support from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's dual-enrollment program.

In addition to academic support, Gateway to College provides wrap-around services to address the social and emotional needs of students. Participating students have an opportunity to learn within a small cadre of their peers and are taught by a team of instructors and resource specialists. After the first year of intensive transitional guidance to build their academic and personal skills, students join the general college student population. The program combines high expectations with personal coaching and support.

Although the Gateway to College program is relatively new, early data indicate promising results. Students who experienced poor attendance rates in high school show an increase in attendance at Gateway (an average rate of 82 percent). To date, Gateway students have passed 72 percent of nearly 70,000 college courses with a C or better. Opportunity Youth who were failed by their traditional high school have found postsecondary success through the Gateway to College program.

Conclusion and looking ahead

To address the issues that lead to today's vast Opportunity Youth population in our nation, we must focus on strategies that work and continue to explore, evaluate, and advance the core elements of these promising strategies.

The needs of Opportunity Youth span beyond education and extend into social and economic issues. Promising programs develop multi-sector partnerships and incorporate various support mechanisms that have a far greater impact than single-response, stand-alone initiatives. Effective education and credentialing programs are youth-centric and responsive to the diverse needs of Opportunity Youth. Flexibility and accessibility are some of the foremost criteria that mark successful strategies. By accommodating conditions that prevented youth from participating in traditional educational settings, these types of programs provide on-ramps and make education obtainable, despite challenging conditions. Another crucial element of successful strategies is the incorporation of work experience or career exposure into secondary and postsecondary academic curricula to reinforce the relevance of learning and skill development to the job market. Successful education programs for at-risk youth seize opportunities to systematically link education and credentialing to workforce needs.

Many youth serving programs exist across the country and new promising practices are emerging, yet the numbers of disconnected youth continue to increase at epidemic rates. It is critical to develop data-tracking systems and robust evaluation processes of all these programs. Systems that capture both qualitative and quantitative information will be required for accountability and to identify effective programs for replication. School districts must implement data systems that provide teachers and administrators with accurate and meaningful real-time data that can help identify students who are at risk of dropping out. All schools need to be aware of the early warning signs of disconnection. Furthermore, educational institutions need the resources to provide students with appropriate and effective interventions.

It is time to reaffirm the commitment, re-establish the moral and political will to reconnect these youth and get them back on track to lead productive, successful, and satisfying lives.

Opportunity Youth want to learn and be successful. In order to do so, they first must acquire the basic education skills that traditional public schools failed to provide to them. In addition, Opportunity Youth want and need postsecondary credentials, employment training, and life skills that will connect them to the opportunities for employment they have lacked. Opportunity Youth yearn to feel valued and respected. While the programs highlighted provide Opportunity Youth with the supports to meet their needs, it is the coordinated effort of the dedicated people with the passion to improve the lives of young people who make the programs truly successful.



The Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University is an action oriented think tank that informs and advances research-based policy, legislative, and programmatic solutions to eliminate the challenges impeding the success of K-12 education in New Orleans and beyond.

Applied Research at the Cowen Institute



We serve as an objective voice to education leaders, policymakers, the media, and the public about what is taking place in public education in New Orleans- and across the country-by disseminating relevant data and research. This publication, and others released in the past, can be found at <http://education.tulane.edu>.

Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives
Tulane University
200 Broadway Street, Suite 108
New Orleans, Louisiana 70118
504-274-3690
<http://education.tulane.edu>

ⁱ John Bridgeland and Jessica Milano, “Opportunity Road, The Promise and Challenge of America’s Forgotten Youth,” http://www.civicerprises.net/reports/opportunity_road.pdf

ⁱⁱ High school Dropouts in America: Fact Sheet, Alliance for Excellent Education, Sept 2010: http://www.all4ed.org/files/GraduationRates_FactSheet.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Digest of Education Statistics: 2010. Table 241, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/>