

WORKING DRAFT

THE NEED TO RE-ENGAGE STRUGGLING STUDENTS AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH: A CONTINUING CONVERSATION

I. Background. For much of our nation’s quarter-century debate about strategies to improve educational attainment, the plight of struggling students and out-of-school youth has received scant attention among mainstream reformers. For the most part, public officials, employers and policy makers have seemed to believe that increasing academic rigor – whether in the form of strengthened core curricula, demanding academic standards or varieties of high-stakes assessments – was all that was needed, and that those students who were already struggling or dropping out would either find a way to shape up or simply do what their peers in earlier generations had done – disappear to the margins of American society.

A. A Look Back. Despite the lack of attention to the needs of disconnected youth in the mainstream education reform movement, the topic has been the subject of discussion and study among researchers, policy analysts and public officials for at least two decades. Reacting in large measure to the landmark 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* and other studies of its kind that focused solely on increasing academic rigor, youth advocates argued that youth who were currently faring poorly were unlikely to see any benefit from such actions without different approaches and more supports.

(1) The 1980s.

- One of the earliest discussions of the challenges faced by out-of-school and out-of-work youth is found in *Children in Need: Investment Strategies for the Educationally Disadvantaged*, a 1987 report issued by the **Committee on Economic Development**. This report warned in dire terms of the risks not only to undereducated children and youth, but also to the nation’s broader social and economic well-being. The study included several forward-looking recommendations aimed at dropout prevention and re-engagement, including
 - smaller learning environments,
 - secondary-postsecondary blends,
 - mentoring,
 - connections between school and work, and
 - providing small, innovative alternative schools to re-enroll out-of-school youth.
- In the years that followed, several other reports stressed the need to develop strategies for under-educated youth. For example, two studies funded by the William T. Grant Foundation, *The Forgotten Half: Non-College Youth in America* and *The Forgotten Half: Pathway to Success for America’s Youth and Young Families*, (both in 1988) chronicled the difficulties faced by youth who do not go on to college (or in many instances do not finish high school), calling attention to their questionable prospects for transitioning successfully to productive adulthood.

(b) The 1990s.

- One of the first and most influential studies promoting positive youth development as a re-engagement strategy for disconnected young people came in 1995, with the release of research findings by **Public/Private Ventures** on its evaluation of **mentoring programs** operated by Big Brothers/Big Sisters (1995), which documented the positive impacts on a wide range of academic and social indicators of caring relationships between adults and youth.
- Additional reports by the American Youth Policy Forum, *Some Things Do Make A Difference* (1997) and *More Things that Make A Difference* (1999), countered the conventional wisdom that nothing worked to increase educational and employment options for disconnected youth.
- AYPF also produced *The Forgotten Half Revisited* (1998), a status report and update to its landmark study of a decade earlier.
- Efforts to document and demonstrate that workplace and academic successes were possible for disconnected youth culminated in the late 1990s with the creation of the **National Youth Employment Coalition's Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet)**, that sought to identify quality programs and to counter findings of the national JTPA evaluation that much youth programming was ineffective.
- Perhaps the most influential of the decade's reports on disconnected young people was the 1997 report *A Generation of Challenge – Pathways to Success for Urban Youth*, by the Johns Hopkins University **Sar Levitan Center for Policy Studies**, which offered a set of research-based youth program principles that included:
 - connections to at least one caring adult
 - the centrality of work and connections to employers
 - a variety of options for improving educational and skill competencies, with opportunities to pursue postsecondary education
 - access to support services; and
 - opportunities for leadership and service.

In one of *Generation's* most provocative chapters, Gary Walker of Public/Private Ventures argued that, while the principles of successful programs for disconnected youth were coming to be better understood and were evident in individual programs around the country, the major missing link was a system with which to deliver effective programs at significant levels to the young people who needed them. The primary reason for this, Walker states, is “our unwillingness to face the fact that no one formal high school system is ever going to work for all youth.”

B. The “Rediscovery” of Disconnected Youth: 2000 –the Present. Near the end of the new century’s first decade, we are experiencing a renewed interest in the nation’s struggling students and out-of-school youth, who are even gaining widespread public attention through mainstream media such as *Time Magazine* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. As a result, the altogether appropriate advocacy for more rigorous curricula and course content, led by **ACHIEVE** and the **Education Trust**, is being augmented by a growing understanding among education and workforce policy leaders that we need what **Jobs for the Future** has termed a “*Dual Agenda*”: i.e. increases in the both quality and the quantity of high school graduates ready for college, careers and success.

Leading this resurgence in interest and concern for disconnected young people is not the federal government – both legislative and executive branches continue to collaborate in the steady disinvestment and dismantling of local youth workforce programming – but rather by national and regional philanthropies. Perhaps this was for the best, since creative approaches driven by research and innovation are yielding impressive results, and augur well for the development of a new round of effective practices for struggling students and out-of-school youth.

The growing understanding of the challenges faced by struggling students and out-of-school youth and the awakening sense that actionable solutions are feasible was made possible by a rich body of research. The following pages summarize several of these key articles and reports, and lead to culminating sections in which key themes are summarized and potential vehicles for action in Pennsylvania are presented.

(1) Research Defining the Nature and Extent of the Dropout Crisis. The dawning of the new century brought a new awareness and renewed sense of urgency regarding the needs of disconnected young people.

- In early 2001, Harvard University hosted a conference focused on “*Dropouts in America: How Severe is the Problem?*” A number of key research papers were presented, including *Why Students Drop Out of School and What Can be Done*, by Russell Rumberger of UC Santa Barbara. Rumberger suggests two perspectives from which to view the dropout issue: (1) the individual perspective, which includes social engagement – e.g. sense of belonging and peer/adult relationships; academic achievement – e.g. absenteeism, retention and discipline problems; and student mobility; and (2) institutional perspective – e.g. high-risk settings, socio-economic factors and households factors – e.g. single parent families.

His analysis of the theoretical and empirical literature suggests three conclusions:

- Dropping is not simply the result of academic failure, but rather often results from both social and academic problems in school,
 - These problems often appear early in students’ school careers, suggesting the need for early intervention; and
 - These problems are often influenced by a lack of support and resources in families, schools and communities.
- Studies also highlighted the critical importance of successful transitions between 8th and 9th grades – e.g. *Easing the Transition to High School: An Investigation*

of Reform Practices to Promote Ninth Grade Success (2001) by **Legters** and **Kerr** of Johns Hopkins Center for Social Organization of Schools; and *Connecting Dropout and Departure: The Transition to Ninth Grade and High School Dropout*, by **Neild, Stoner-Eby** and **Furstenberg** of the University of Pennsylvania. Both studies document that academic failure during the transition to high school is linked to the probability of dropping out.

- A particularly influential paper that helped to launch the current interest in vulnerable youth is the 2003 study *Connected by 25: Improving the Life Chances of the Country's Most Vulnerable 14-24 Year Olds*, by **Michael Wald** and **Tia Martinez** for the Hewlett Foundation. Wald and Martinez chronicle the challenges confronting disconnected youth, and argue for a strong focus on supporting young people in public care systems, including juvenile justice and foster care, as well as young women with children.

A critical point made by Wald and Martinez echoes Walker's system-related comments in *A Generation of Challenge*: "There are programs available for these youth..." they state, "but programs are not enough. There needs to be a system that has responsibility for reaching out to those not making it, with adequate dedicated resources The key is accepting the public responsibility."

The research of Wald and Martinez also helped to focus the work of the **Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG)**, a set of national and regional philanthropies focused on improving educational options for struggling students and out-of-school youth. YTFG provided funding to five cities – Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Portland and San Jose – to undertake a strategic assessment and to begin to develop enhance the quality and quantity of educational options that meet the needs of disconnected young people. The YTFG framework included:

- Identifying and analyzing data that characterized struggling students and out-of-school youth;
 - Identifying policy and funding barriers and opportunities;
 - Assessing the availability of high-quality educational options; and
 - Increasing stakeholder involvement in efforts to support disconnected youth.
- **Jobs for the Future (JFF)**, a national intermediary that provides technical assistance to sites funded by the **Gates Foundation**, **YTFG** and the **U.S. Department of Labor**, authored *Making Good on a Promise* (2006), which complemented the work of Wald and Martinez and *A Generation of Challenge* by identifying key characteristics of the dropout population and challenging the belief that nothing can be done to increase their educational and economic prospects. For example, the report finds:
 - Dropping out is not confined to a small group of young people, but is "a full-fledged epidemic" in both low-income and more affluent communities;

- Socio-economic status, rather than race or ethnicity, is the key indicator for dropping out;
- Most dropouts are remarkably persistent in their efforts to get a secondary credential, with close to 60% of dropouts eventually earning one – usually a GED; and
- Many dropouts pursue postsecondary education, but few earn degrees.

Making Good on a Promise also suggests lessons learned from research for policy-makers, including:

- Refocus PK-12 accountability systems to focus on the dual agenda;
- Create new pathways to college, particularly in low-income communities; and
- Redesign dropout recovery programs to build on student aspirations and the demands of a knowledge-based economy.

(2) Strategies to Address the Dropout Crisis. Beyond describing the problem, many studies also began to frame solutions.

- **JFF** also produced several reports focusing on research-based strategies for addressing the dropout crisis. These included *Four Building Blocks of System of Educational Opportunity* (2003) and *From the Prison Track to the College Track* (2004), which again call for a “system for youth development and opportunity” that includes a “diversity of educational programming to prevent dropout and to re-engage out-of-school youth”; e.g.
 - reinvented high schools that are small, focused and rigorous, and that are directly connected to work that matters to young people and to the larger community;
 - secondary-postsecondary blends, that connect high school and college course-taking, particularly focused on youth deemed at high risk of not completing high school;
 - extended learning opportunities, that engage youth in intensive learning beyond the school building that also has the potential to earn academic credit; and
 - education/employment blends, that combine academics with work and occupational skills training leading to marketable credentials.
- *Seeking Safe Passages* (2005), a **YTFG** project, proposes several framework elements for connecting struggling students and out-of-school youth.
 - Early intervention – e.g. research indicates that the 8-9th transition is key to student success, and that dropout predictors can be identified and addressed as early as 6th grade.

- Shared responsibility and system coordination, with particular emphasis on shared data.
 - Adequate supply of choice-based, high-quality educational alternatives.
 - Flexible referral and re-enrollment policies.
 - Credit for proficiency.
 - Resource allocation and financial incentives – i.e. fiscal coordination and strategic budgeting to provide funding for high-need youth, and incentives for success that reward schools for holding and re-enrolling students; and
 - Knowledgeable adult advocates who can help youth negotiate public and educational systems.
- **Linda Harris** of the **Center for Law and Social Policy**, in a 2005 article for the *Clearinghouse REVIEW Journal of Poverty Law and Policy* entitled ***What's a Youngster to Do? The Education and Labor Market Plight of Youth in High-Poverty Communities***, reiterates the challenges faced by struggling students and out-of-school youth, and posits several things that must happen to address them:
- Systemic education reform that features multiple high-quality education options that keep students engaged and provide “on ramps” to bring out-of-school youth back to education;
 - Collaboration across all youth-serving systems (e.g. schools, foster care, juvenile justice, workforce development, etc.)
 - Alignment of federal, state and local resources is support of systemic approaches;
 - Incorporation of 21st century skills into alternative learning opportunities, with employers playing key roles; and
 - Opportunities for work experience and community service.
- A 2005 publication by the **Consortium on Chicago School Research** entitled ***The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation*** documents the importance of steady progress and on-time promotion to eventual graduation. According to the study, a single “F” in the 9th grade significantly reduces the likelihood of graduation. But with targeted interventions, such academic deficiencies can be addressed with corresponding improvements in high school graduation rates.
- A 2006 study by **Robert Balfanz** of Johns Hopkins and **Liza Herzog** of the Philadelphia Education Fund entitled ***Keeping Middle Students on Track to Graduation***, suggests that as many as 50% of eventual dropouts can be identified as early as 6th grade based on factors such as failure of English or math; attendance and behavior.
- ***Unfulfilled Promise: the Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis*** (2006) by **Balfanz** and **Ruth Neild**, also of Hopkins, included

ground-breaking research on high school dropouts that not only addressed the dimensions of the problem, but also pointed the way towards solutions. Specifically, *Unfulfilled Promise* suggests that as many as 80% of eventual dropouts can be identified as early as the 9th grade, and that students who arrive at 10th grade on-time have a much higher probability of eventually graduating.

(3) Alternative Education and Training. When delivered well, alternative educational approaches have much in common with efforts to engage disconnected young people discussed above, including

- innovative pedagogies,
- smaller classes and
- connections to real-world learning.

Unfortunately they share other traits: they are typically small and largely isolated from institutions and systems. Therefore, the comments of Walker, Wald and Martinez about the lack of delivery system also ring true for alternative education.

Not only are true alternative education systems quite rare, but there is no commonly agreed-upon definition or typology which describes alternative education's characteristics and traits. In fact, alternative schools and programs vary widely with regard to standards, structure, accountability, policies and procedures, hours, admissions, pedagogy and instructional focus, and community and parent involvement. To bring some clarity to the discussion of the topic, **Laudan Aron**, in an extremely thoughtful 2006 study for the **Urban Institute**, describes alternative education typologies identified in three different research studies.

- **M.A Raywid**, writing in *Alternative Schools: the State of the Art* (1994), describes three types of foci for organizing alternative schools:
 - Type I Schools are “full-time, multi-year options for students of all kinds,” that provide credits toward high school graduation, smaller and more supportive learning environments and individualized instruction. Models range from schools-within-schools to charters to after-hour recovery programs.
 - Type II Schools are primarily focused on discipline, and “aim to segregate, contain and reform disruptive students.” Placement is involuntary and short-term, with curricula limited to a few required subjects.
 - Type III Schools provide voluntary, “short-term but therapeutic settings” for targeted student populations with social/emotional problems that create barriers to learning. They offer counseling, access to social services and academic remediation.

According to Raywid, Type I Schools are the most successful approach, with Type II Schools much less likely to realize academic gains. Type III programs demonstrate some progress while students are attending, but gains tend to dissipate over time.

- **Aron and Zweig**, in *Educational Alternatives for Vulnerable Youth: Student Needs, Program Types and Research Directions* (2003) propose a typology that focuses on the target population, physical setting and program administration; i.e.:
 - *who is served* in the alternative setting (e.g. OSY, pregnant and parenting teens, delinquent youth, low-achievers, at-risk youth);
 - *where they are served* (e.g. in resource rooms, pull-out programs, schools-within-a-school, in self-contained schools, community-based locations, etc.)
 - *what are the content and objectives of the alternative program* (e.g. regular diploma, GED, occupational skills certificate, internships, or employment); and
 - *how is the program administered and funded*, e.g. by the school district, CBO, charter school, adult education, juvenile justice or private operators.

- The **University of Chicago's Melissa Roderick** offers still another approach to defining alternative education programming. Roderick suggests that the most appropriate typology is neither risk factors nor program characteristics, but rather students' educational issues. She posits four types:
 - Students who have fallen off-track because of a specific problem and need short-term interventions to regain their footing.
 - Students who have prematurely transitioned into adulthood; e.g. teen parents or youth in the juvenile justice system.
 - Substantially off-track students who are older and who are returning on a short-term basis to gain credits to transition into community college or training; and
 - Substantially off-track students who are older but are significantly deficient in academic credits and reading levels, making existing educational options inappropriate.

(4) Case Studies of Community Approaches. Two sets of case studies published in 2006 and 2007 document the efforts of cities around the nation that attempt to address the dropout crisis by building consortia of stakeholders with interests in attacking the problem.

- *Across City Limits: Cross-System Collaboration to Re-engage Disconnected Youth* (2007), published by the **National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education and Families**, argues that collaboration across multiple agencies and systems offers local leaders “a more effective and coordinated method of improving outcomes for disconnected youth and a more efficient way of doing business.” For example:
 - “Strategies to help disconnected youth make successful transitions to adulthood typically are effective only when designed to address multiple

needs – for continuing education, employment, mentoring, and a range of personal supports.”

- “The inter-related nature of issues facing disconnected youth requires a collaborative approach;” i.e. no one institution, including the schools, can do this job alone; and
 - “Simply opening a dialogue about the gaps between public systems serving young people can yield major dividends.”
- The American Youth Policy Forum produced *Whatever it Takes: How Twelve Communities are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*. It provides considerable detail about local approaches, and summarizes characteristics of the efforts highlighted:
- Open-entry/open-exit – i.e. flexibly-paced programming, often based on competency-based curriculum modules aligned with standards and offering a regular high school diploma;
 - Flexible scheduling and year-round learning, including non-traditional hours;
 - Teachers as coaches, facilitators and crew leaders;
 - Real-world, career-priented curricula;
 - Opportunities for employment
 - Coeds of conduct consistent consistent enforcement;
 - Extensive support services; and
 - A portfolio of options for youth with varying needs and strengths.

(5) Returns on Investment Studies. Within the last two years, increasing attention is being placed not only the dimensions of the dropout crisis and steps to address it, but also on the fiscal consequences and costs to government of its residents’ that do not earn a high school diploma.

- The **Campaign for Educational Equity**, launched by **Teachers College, Columbia University**, convened a conference and published a series of papers in Fall 2005 addressing the social and economic costs of an inadequate education. Findings from the campaign include:
- A national study by Princeton economist **Cecelia Rouse** estimates that, over a lifetime, an 18-year-old who graduates earns \$260,000 more than a person without a diploma, and contributes \$60,000 more in federal and state income taxes.
 - According to **Jane Waldfogel** of the Columbia University School of Social Work, if all Americans who receive public assistance and are dropouts had instead earned a high school diploma, the savings in federal welfare spending would range from \$7.9-10.8B each year.

- **Enrico Maretti** of UC Berkeley found that a one percent increase nationally in high school completion rates of men 20-6- years-old would save the US as much as \$1.4B annually in reduced costs from crime.
- **Northeastern University’s Center for Labor Market Studies** is a leader in chronicling the labor market challenges of under-educated teens. CLMS also produced a 2007 study of the fiscal consequences of dropping out on state and local governments in Massachusetts, which identified the gap between the costs of transfer payments for dropouts and the tax revenue generated by high school graduates exceeded \$450,000 over a lifetime.

C. Summing Up: What are the Consistent Themes and Effective Practices in Alternative Education and Training Programs?

(1) Key Elements. The varieties of alternative schools and second chance programs make comprehensive evaluations difficult. In the absence of empirical research, Aron suggests a list of characteristics based on studies and reports of a number of national organizations that have also promoted youth development and career preparation efforts (Jobs for the Future, the National Youth Employment Coalition and the Urban Institute), and several research summaries on the efficacy of alternative education strategies. According to Aron’s synthesis, effective alternative programs include:

- A clear focus on academic instruction, with rigorous standards and varieties of instructional approaches.
- Instructional staff who choose to be part of the program, and receive on-going professional development
- Schools that are small and have low student-teacher ratios, encouraging caring relationships between youth and adults
- Facilities that are clean, safe and foster a sense of pride
- Community partnerships that provide linkages to community organizations for assistance and support, and to employers for workplace connections
- Administrative and bureaucratic autonomy, and operational flexibility; and
- Student supports through structured but flexible individualized programming.

(2) A Clear Convergence. Those familiar with the current thinking on high school reform will recognize most of the characteristics. In fact, to a considerable extent these elements define our current thinking about effective educational programming at the high school level. As one example, these elements compare quite favorably with a compilation of high school reform effective practices identified by Jennifer Husbands for the Aspen Institute in 2004. The major categories included in her *Selected Review of High School Reform Strategies* include:

- Small Schools and Small Learning Communities
- Applied Learning
- K-16 Alignment and Dual Enrollment

- Professional Development
- Upgrading curriculum and instruction to eliminate non-college prep offerings
- Youth Development; and
- Whole School Reform.

The Gates Foundation, in an evaluation of its National School District and Networks Grants Program, which has provided hundreds of millions of dollars in support of high school reform, identifies its own characteristics of effective high schools, based on a rigorous analysis of research. They include:

- A common focus on key research-based goals;
- High expectations, with all students completing a rigorous core curriculum;
- Small, personalized learning environments;
- Respect and responsibility among students, among teachers and between these groups;
- Time to collaborate, and the inclusion of parents and the community in an educational partnership;

In short, there is clear and compelling evidence that, whether served within a school setting or in an alternative or non-school environment.

D. Accomplishing the Tasks that Remain Undone. Despite the welcome interest philanthropic investments in disconnected youth, the problem identified by Gary Walker ten years ago and echoed by Wald and Martinez in 2003 continues to present the greatest challenge. Then, as now, there are pockets of effective practices; but the task yet to be accomplished is the creation of a true *system* of policies, programs and resources to support young people. Such an approach is “the experiment this nation now needs,” Walker wrote in *Challenge*. And if such an experiment were undertaken, “it also might point the way toward an enlarged vision of schooling and work preparation, one that did not break teens ...into ... school successes and failures – but supported a variety of ways for all of our youth to achieve the competencies and careers they need to become self-sufficient.”

While we are still along way from the systems we need, that experiment is finally underway.

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Web Resources

American Youth Policy Forum: www.aypf.org

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation: www.gatesfoundation.org/education/

Carnegie Corporation of NY: www.carnegie.org/sub/program/education.html

Center for Law and Social Policy: www.clasp.org

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation: www.mott.org

The Education Trust: www.edtrust.org

Forum for Youth Investment: www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

Jobs for the Future: www.jff.org

National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families: ww.nlc.org/IYEF

National Youth Employment Coalition: www.nyec.org

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Teachers College, Columbia University Campaign for Educational Equity:
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Urban Institute: www.urban.org

Youth Transition Funders Group: www.ytfg.org