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AGAINST ALL ODDS: COMMUNITY AND POLICY SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS THE
AMERICAN YOUTH CRISIS

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INTRODUCTION

The phrase “against all odds” is a common colloquial saying in America. What exactly are the odds we are referring to in reference to poor and low-income youth of color living in our urban centers?

Anthony is sixteen years old, living on the east side of Baltimore City. When asked why he dropped out of school, he replied, “My mother was diagnosed with a mental illness and she could not work anymore. She took care of me—so it was my turn to step up. I didn’t jump right out there” Before getting involved in illegal activities, Anthony tried to get a job, but was unsuccessful—he didn’t have a high school diploma and had no work experience. Anthony was motivated to get his life back on track after his uncle and his mother were shot in his home. At nineteen, three years after dropping out of high school, he graduated from the Youth Opportunity Program in Baltimore City with his GED and was headed to Baltimore City Community College.

We live in uncertain economic times. An increasing number of families are living in or falling into poverty. Unemployment is persistently high, and states and communities are facing impossible budget shortfalls. In addition to these challenges, the nation’s disadvantaged youth are

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in crisis. More than six million youth and young adults ages sixteen to twenty-four—disproportionately male, black, and Hispanic— have dropped out of high school.¹ America's youth are experiencing depression-era levels of employment, with less than 20% of African-American and Latino youth employed, compared to about 30% for their white counterparts.² Youth of color are also disproportionately affected by violence. Homicide is the leading cause of death for African-Americans ten to twenty-four years old, the second leading cause of death for Hispanics, and the third leading cause of death for Asian/Pacific Islanders, American Indians, and Alaska Natives.³

Anthony's story is not unlike the stories of many young men of color living in poor communities. The deterioration of the social fabric in communities of color and poor neighborhoods across this country is all too real. The odds of successful transition to adulthood are stacked against young people living in high-poverty communities. Lack of opportunity saturates their daily existence and far too many are idle and disengaged from civic life, education, and employment. A comprehensive, community-wide approach is needed to keep young people connected and get those who are off-track back on-track. Youth recovery requires leadership, innovation, and strategic planning at the local level, and it is imperative that local approaches be supported with sufficient federal resources, guidance, and policy intervention.

This article will: (1) lay out the magnitude of employment and education challenges facing youth outside the mainstream; (2) discuss the influence of youth perception on program and policy implementation; (3) highlight effective community practice; and (4) make recommendations for moving a national workforce agenda with local implications.

I. FRAMING THE YOUTH CHALLENGE

Young Americans graduating from college or high school continue to face the worst job market in at least a quarter century.⁴ Not only is unemployment persistently high, but youth face competition for jobs from adults forced to take jobs for which they may be over-qualified or older workers delaying retirement or reentering the workforce due to the bad economy.⁵

Only recently has the national unemployment rate dipped below 9%, but at about 8.5 % it is still high. The unemployment rate represents between 13 million and 14 million Americans.⁶ Public discourse and media attention correctly have focused on the decline of the middle class and

¹ THE CTR. FOR LABOR MKT. STUDIES, NORTHEASTERN UNIV., *LEFT BEHIND IN AMERICA: THE NATION'S DROPOUT CRISIS 8-10* (2009), available at http://www.northeastern.edu/clms/wp-content/uploads/CLMS_2009_Dropout_Report.pdf (containing statistics on the number of individuals ages sixteen to twenty-four without a high school diploma).

² BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, U.S. DEP'T OF LABOR, *EMPLOYMENT-POPULATION RATIO – TIO TIYRS., WHITE, CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY* (2011), <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/srgate> (accessed by searching series id LNU02300021, LNU02300015, and LNU02300018) (last accessed on Jan. 19, 2012).

³ CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL, *YOUTH VIOLENCE: FACTS AT A GLANCE* (2010), available at <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/yv-datasheet-a.pdf>.

⁴ Josh Bivens et al., *The Class of 2010: Economic Prospects for Young Adults in the Recession*, ECON. POLICY INST. 5 (2010), available at <http://www.epi.org/page/-/pdf/bp265.pdf> (containing background information for the labor market status of young Americans).

⁵ Kathryn Anne Edwards & Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, *The Kids Aren't Alright: A Labor Market Analysis of Young Workers*, ECON. POLICY INST. 9 (2010), available at <http://www.epi.org/page/-/bp258/bp258.pdf>.

⁶ BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, U.S. DEP'T OF LABOR, *THE EMPLOYMENT SITUATION—DECEMBER 2011*, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empisit.pdf>.

getting adults who have lost their jobs back to work and/or retrained with new skills to meet the demands of new and transforming industries. Discourse has also examined the number of college graduates who are having a difficult time finding work and the broken promise of the careers that they and their parents assumed would be waiting. Saddled with debt, college graduates are returning home to live with their parents and are delaying “typical” post-college transitions.

What is glaringly missing from this conversation is the continued plight of work and opportunity for black and brown young people living in the nation’s poorest and most at-risk communities. Omitted from the conversation are young people like Anthony, who have dropped out of high school and are confronted with insurmountable odds. What of their story is being told? And what are the national and local responses to their situation?

Regrettably, even before the Great Recession, not all youth experienced the ideal path toward adulthood—graduating from high school, enrolling in college or a training program, graduating and entering into a career that will pay them enough to take care of themselves and their families. This “ideal” pathway has been a far reach for countless young people. Berzin and De Marco’s study of the impact of poverty on emerging adulthood suggests that poor youth do not experience the same opportunity to progressively develop into adult roles. For poor youth, gaining the skills, education, and social exploration time critical to successfully transition into adulthood may require additional support.⁷ Poor youth of color are in effect *swimming upstream and against all odds*. The statistics are sobering.

Over the past decade, teen and young adult employment in the United States has been on a steady course of decline. Employment-population rates for teens ages sixteen to nineteen have dropped by 15%, from 42.4% in 2001 to 25.8% in 2011.⁸ Likewise, although not as steep of a drop, the percentage of employed young adults ages twenty to twenty-four has also fallen, from 70.7% in 2001 to 60.9% in 2011, a drop of 9.8%.⁹ The most recent recession is effectively crushing employment prospects for black and Latino youth. At the peak of summer 2011, just fewer than 19% of Latino teens were employed¹⁰ compared to 32% of white teens ages sixteen to nineteen.¹¹ Younger African-American workers have faced particularly low employment participation rates, with less than one out of every five teenagers working.¹² These numbers have significant implications for work projections of Black and Latino youth. According to the U.S.

⁷ See Stephanie Cosner Berzin & Allison C. De Marco, *Understanding the Impact of Poverty on Critical Events in Emerging Adulthood*, 42 *YOUTH SOC’Y* 278, 281-91 (2009), available at <http://yas.sagepub.com/content/42/2/278.full.pdf+html>.

⁸ BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, U.S. DEP’T OF LABOR, EMPLOYMENT-POPULATION RATIO – 16-19 YRS., CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY (2011), <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/srgate> (accessed by searching series id LNS12300012) (last accessed on Jan. 19, 2012).

⁹ BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, U.S. DEP’T OF LABOR, EMPLOYMENT-POPULATION RATIO – 20-24 YRS., CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY (2011), <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/srgate> (accessed by searching series id LNS12300036) (last accessed on Jan. 19, 2012).

¹⁰ U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, U.S. DEP’T OF LABOR, EMPLOYMENT-POPULATION RATIO – 16-19 YRS., HISPANIC OR LATINO, CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY (2011), <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/srgate> (accessed by searching series id LNU02300021) (last accessed on Jan. 19, 2012).

¹¹ U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, U.S. DEP’T OF LABOR, EMPLOYMENT-POPULATION RATIO – 16-19 YRS., WHITE, CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY (2011), <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/srgate> (accessed by searching series id LNU02300015) (last accessed on Jan. 19, 2012).

¹² U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, U.S. DEP’T OF LABOR, EMPLOYMENT-POPULATION RATIO – 16-19 YRS., BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN, CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY (2011), <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/srgate> (accessed by searching series id LNU02300018) (last accessed on Jan. 19, 2012).

Bureau of Labor Statistics, while the Hispanic teen unemployment rate remains high, a large number of teens are no longer in the labor force (either working or looking for work) and therefore are not counted in the unemployment figures.¹³ Some justification for this change is attributed to an increased number of Latino youth remaining enrolled in school. However, it should be noted that the national graduation rate for Latino youth remains unacceptably low at 56%¹⁴ and is not nearly high enough to neutralize the degradation of jobs and the positive effects work experience has on youth. Furthermore, historical trends reveal black workers are disproportionately represented among the unemployed and make up an even larger share of the long-term, chronically unemployed.¹⁵ This unfortunate truth signals a depressing future outlook for African-American youth and their employment prospects.

High joblessness is especially prevalent among individuals with limited education and skills experience. High school dropouts and graduates without some level of post-secondary education or training are most at risk for being left behind in the future U.S. labor market.¹⁶ In December 2011, less than half of all high school dropouts ages sixteen to twenty-four were employed.¹⁷ For out-of-school black youth, it's 28%.¹⁸ With little or no work experience, education, and training, teens and young adults struggle in the job market where they must try to compete with more experienced workers.

A dearth of legitimate employment experiences, coupled with the substandard state of education outcomes for the poor and minorities, makes clear the gravity of the challenge. Each year, approximately 1.3 million students do not graduate from high school on time, with more than half being students of color.¹⁹ Considerable progress has been made nationally in improving high school graduation rates—since 1997 the needle has moved 6.2 percentage points to an overall U.S. high school graduation rate of 71.7%.²⁰ However, graduation rates for black, Latino, and American-Indians remain persistently low—at 57%, 57.6%, and 53.9%, respectively.²¹ The rates are worse for young black men. Black males in the United States are 31% less likely to

¹³ U.S. DEP'T OF LABOR, THE HISPANIC LABOR FORCE IN THE RECOVERY 3 (2011), *available at* http://www.dol.gov/_sec/media/reports/hispaniclaborforce/.

¹⁴ ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUC., FACT SHEET: HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS IN AMERICA 1 (2010), *available at* http://www.all4ed.org/files/GraduationRates_FactSheet.pdf.

¹⁵ CHRISTIAN E. WELLER ET AL., CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS, THE STATE OF COMMUNITIES OF COLOR IN THE U.S. ECONOMY 1-6 (2011) (containing facts on the impact of the Great Recession on the employment status of minorities).

¹⁶ ANTHONY P. CARNEVALE ET AL., GEORGETOWN UNIV. CTR. ON EDUC. & THE WORKFORCE, HELP WANTED: PROJECTIONS OF JOBS AND EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS THROUGH 2018, at 5 (2010), *available at* <http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/FullReport.pdf>.

¹⁷ U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, U.S. DEP'T OF LABOR, EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF THE CIVILIAN NONINSTITUTIONAL POPULATION 16 TO 24 YEARS OF AGE BY SCHOOL ENROLLMENT, EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, SEX, RACE, AND HISPANIC OR LATINO ETHNICITY, CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY, *available at* <http://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea16.pdf> (last accessed on Jan. 19, 2012).

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Graduation Rates*, ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUC., http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis/students/grad_rates (last visited Jan. 18, 2012).

²⁰ News Release, Editorial Projects in Educ. Research Ctr., Progress on Graduation Rate Stalls: 1.3 Million Students Fail to Earn Diplomas (June 10, 2010), http://www.edweek.org/media/ew/dc/2010/DC10_PressKit_FINAL.pdf.

²¹ *Achievement Gap*, EDUC. WEEK, Aug. 3, 2004, www.edweek.org/ew/issues/achievement-gap/ (last updated July 7, 2011).

graduate from high school than their white males peers.²² In places like Washington, D.C. and New York, the black male/white male graduation gap jumps to 16% and 43% respectively.²³ Poverty is also strongly linked to graduation outcomes. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, poor youth (as defined by family income) are about seven times more likely to drop out of high school than their upper-income counterparts.²⁴

If we examine trends among young people who are connected to the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, the same trend exists. Youth of color are disproportionately represented and fare worse, exhibiting education and employment outcomes detrimental to their futures. Youth of color are over-represented at all stages in the juvenile justice system.²⁵ For example, black youth only represent 17% of the overall youth population, but make up 30% of those arrested and 62% of the youth prosecuted in the adult criminal system.²⁶ Similarly, Latino youth are 43% more likely than white youth to be waived into the adult system and 40% more likely to be admitted to adult prison.²⁷ Native-American youth are 1.5 times more likely to receive out-of-home placement and are 1.5 times more likely to be waived into the adult criminal system than their white counterparts.²⁸ Research suggests that “youth who move across systems experience disruption in their home lives as well as in the educational system,”²⁹ and those who spend time in juvenile facilities are “less likely to succeed at education and employment at the same level as youth who were never incarcerated.”³⁰ Young people in the foster care system also have lower education and employment outcomes and need increased support to ensure a healthy transition into adult life. According to the most recent figures, an estimated 28,000 young people “age out” of the U.S. foster care system every year.³¹ A Chapin Hall study of former foster youth found 24% had no high school diploma or GED and 52% were unemployed.³²

Lack of investment in workforce and education activities will not only affect teens right now, but also does not bode well for their long-term earning ability and financial and social

²² SCHOTT FOUND. FOR PUB. EDUC., THE SCHOTT 50 STATE REPORT ON BLACK MALES AND EDUCATION 12 (2010), <http://blackboysreport.org/bbreport.pdf> (containing national, state, and local graduation gap data for black males and white males).

²³ *Id.* at 10.

²⁴ FACT SHEET: HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS IN AMERICA, *supra* note 14, at 1.

²⁵ CAMPAIGN FOR YOUTH JUSTICE, KEY FACTS: YOUTH IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM, (2011), <http://www.campaignforyouthjustice.org/documents/KeyYouthCrimeFacts.pdf>.

²⁶ *Id.* at 4.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Educational Outcomes for Children in the Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice System*, ESSENTIAL EDUCATOR (Mar. 2011), <http://essentialeducator.org/?p=2999>.

³⁰ *The Costs of Confinement: Why Good Juvenile Justice Policies Make Good Fiscal Sense*, JUSTICE POLICY INST. 9 (2009), available at http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/09_05_REP_CostsofConfinement_JJ_PS.pdf.

³¹ MARCI MCCOY-ROTH ET AL., FOSTERING CONNECTIONS, NUMBER OF YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE DROPS BELOW 28,000 IN 2010, at 1 (2010), <http://www.fosteringconnections.org/tools/assets/files/Older-Youth-brief-2011-Final.pdf>.

³² *Youth “Aging Out” of Foster Care*, NAT’L FOSTER CARE COAL., <http://www.nationalfostercare.org/facts/youthagingout.php> (last visited January 21, 2012); see generally JENNIFER L. HOOK & MARK COURTNEY, CHAPIN HALL AT THE UNIV. OF CHICAGO, EMPLOYMENT OF FORMER FOSTER YOUTH AS YOUNG ADULTS: EVIDENCE FROM THE MIDWEST STUDY (2010), available at http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/publications/Midwest_IB3_Employment.pdf.

contributions to society. Idle youth do not follow the typical pathways from adolescence to adulthood. They do not gain adequate education or work experience, and they have no obvious sources of earned income.³³ The state of the youth challenge as described above—the negative education and employment outcomes facing minority and poor youth, including those who have dropped out of high school and those with involvement with the justice and child welfare systems—has critical implications for the social policy and interventions addressed later in the article. Inaction is not only unacceptable on moral grounds, but also has serious economic implications.

Inaction will adversely affect youth, the national economy, and the nation's workforce. Dropping out of high school has the impact of a permanent recession for our youth and presents grave personal and societal consequences.³⁴ Estimated average lifetime earnings for a high school dropout is \$1,198,447, 47% less than an individual with a bachelor's degree.³⁵ Moreover, a recent report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that young adult high school dropouts (between ages 22 and 23), in particular females and non-Hispanic Blacks, were less likely to ever have held a job than were young adults with more education.³⁶ Studies have shown that during their lifetimes, high school dropouts on average will cost taxpayers \$292,000 more than average high school graduates.³⁷ These costs include public assistance, reduced tax revenues, and incarceration. In large states like California, \$46.4 billion in economic losses results from each cohort of 120,000 youth that fails to complete high school.³⁸ These are costs we cannot afford given our current fiscal situation and future economic outlook.

Second, we must consider American competitiveness. In a report on education requirements and the future projections of jobs, Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl found that the American post-secondary education system is ill-equipped and will not produce enough graduates to meet the demands for our workforce.³⁹ The authors contend we will need "22 million new college degrees by 2018 – and will fall short by at least 3 million postsecondary degrees."⁴⁰ In fact, according to their research, post-secondary education is now the gatekeeper to the middle and upper class.⁴¹ The availability of low-cost, low-skilled labor will no longer be in demand as

³³ Anastasia Synder & Diane McLaughlin, *Rural Youth are More Likely to be Idle*, CARSEY INST. (2008), available at http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/FS_RuralYouth_08.pdf.

³⁴ PHILLIP LOVELL & JACQUE MINOW, FIRST FOCUS, RECLAIMING OUR NATION'S YOUTH (2009), available at <http://www.firstfocus.net/sites/default/files/r.2009-8.6.lovell.pdf>.

³⁵ CARNEVALE, *supra* note 16, at 95, Figure 5.1.

³⁶ Press Release, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Dep't of Labor, America's Young Adults at 23: School Enrollment, Training, and Employment Transitions Between Ages 22 and 23 (Feb. 9, 2011), <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/nlsyth.nr0.htm>.

³⁷ ANDREW SUM ET AL., CTR. FOR LABOR MKT. STUDIES, NORTHEASTERN UNIV., THE CONSEQUENCES OF DROPPING OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL 15 (2009), available at http://www.northeastern.edu/clms/wp-content/uploads/The_Consequences_of_Dropping_Out_of_High_School.pdf.

³⁸ CLIVE R. BELFIELD & HENRY M. LEVIN, DROPOUT RESEARCH PROJECT, UC SANTA BARBARA, THE ECONOMIC LOSSES FROM HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS IN CALIFORNIA, CA. (2007), http://www.cbce.org/media/download_gallery/Belfield%20and%20Levin--CDRP%20Policy%20Brief%201.pdf.

³⁹ CARNEVALE, *supra* note 16, at 13.

⁴⁰ ANTHONY P. CARNEVALE ET AL., GEORGETOWN UNIV. CTR. ON EDUC. & THE WORKFORCE, EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, HELP WANTED: PROJECTIONS OF JOBS AND EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS THROUGH 2018, at 1 (2010), available at <http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/ExecutiveSummary-web.pdf>.

⁴¹ CARNEVALE, *supra* note 16, at 1.

was the case in the 1960's and 1970's.⁴² Industries that require a high school diploma or less, such as blue collar occupations (manufacturing, constructions, natural resources, installation and repair, and transportation) do not have good prospects for long-term growth.⁴³

The third point requires an assessment of the changing demographics of the American population and its implications on the nation's workforce. By 2018, the labor market will become more diverse—as a result of higher population growth, the share of the labor force held by minorities is projected to increase significantly.⁴⁴ The number of Asians in the labor force is projected to increase by 29.8% and the number of African-Americans by 14.1%.⁴⁵ In addition, Hispanics or Latinos are projected to enter the labor force in droves, representing an increase of 33.1%.⁴⁶ The fastest growing segments of our labor force have some of the lowest levels of education attainment, with less than half earning a high school diploma. Will they be prepared to join the labor force and assume occupations with career pathways that allow them to earn wages that can sustain a family? Will they have access to the middle class and pathways out of poverty without serious changes to national education and workforce policy?

II. WHY YOUTH JOBS AND EARLY WORK EXPERIENCE MATTER

Youth living in high-poverty communities have less access to work opportunities. In “When Work Disappears,” William Julius Wilson examines what happens to inner-city neighborhoods and their residents when work disappears.⁴⁷ His analysis suggests that as employment opportunities become scarce in inner-city communities, both black and white individuals with means tend to relocate.⁴⁸ As a result, individuals with few resources and access to formal work opportunities remain isolated in inner-city neighborhoods.⁴⁹ It is also important to note that social access and exposure play a significant role in the ability of minority youth to get a job. O'Regan and Quigley argue that job access for urban minority youth is less defined by proximity to the worksite as it is defined by social isolation and the lack of broad social networks.⁵⁰

Jobs and early work experience have been linked to positive outcomes for disadvantaged youth. A study by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University found that disadvantaged teens who work in high school are more likely to remain in high school than their peers who do not work.⁵¹ Their findings predict that less work experience today leads to less

⁴² *Id.* at 14.

⁴³ HARRY J. HOLZER & ROBERT I. LERMAN, THE WORKFORCE ALLIANCE, AMERICA'S FORGOTTEN MIDDLE-SKILL JOBS 15 (2007), http://www.urban.org/UploadedPdf/411633_forgottenjobs.pdf.

⁴⁴ U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, U.S. DEP'T OF LABOR, EMPLOYMENT PROJECTIONS 2000-2018 (Dec. 2009), available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ecopro.pdf>.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ See WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON, WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS: THE WORLD OF THE NEW URBAN POOR (1996) (analyzing the impact of lack of employment opportunities for poor communities).

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ Katherine M. O'Regan & John M. Quigley, *Where Youth Live: Economic Effects of Urban Space on Employment Prospects*, 35 URB. STUD. 1187, 1201 (1998).

⁵¹ ANDREW SUM ET AL., CTR. FOR LABOR MKT. STUDIES, NORTHEASTERN UNIV. THE CONTINUED COLLAPSE OF THE NATION'S TEEN JOB MARKET AND THE DISMAL OUTLOOK FOR THE 2008 SUMMER LABOR MARKET FOR

work experience tomorrow and lower earnings down the road.⁵² The consequences of poverty are linked to negative employment outcomes. For instance, among all men, black or white, only one-third of persistently poor boys go on to have consistent employment in early adulthood.⁵³ And poor black boys are less likely to work as young adults. They are 33% less likely to have consistent employment than non-poor black males.⁵⁴

III. RE-IMAGINING THE LANDSCAPE FOR YOUTH OF COLOR

In testimony on “Ensuring Economic Opportunities for Young Americans,” Algernon Austin of the Economic Policy Institute stated that the problem of youth unemployment is not just specific to our current economic situation.⁵⁵ Therefore, solutions must not rely on short-term fixes but must seek to improve overall youth economic outcomes and circumstances of young workers into the future.⁵⁶ The question remains, what does it take to improve the economic circumstances of young low-income workers of color, especially those that are high school dropouts and otherwise disconnected?

It will take a paradigm shift to improve the economic circumstances of young, low-income workers of color. One cannot simply ignore the statistics and the challenges youth living in communities of high distress must navigate. But to place too much emphasis on the negative ignores the intrinsic promise young people possess despite their circumstances. Applying an assets-based perspective,⁵⁷ we can begin to set a stage of infinite possibilities and strategically plan with and on behalf of youth for those possibilities. In short, leaders and stakeholders must re-imagine the landscape for youth of color.

Too often the level of intervention designed by practitioners and policymakers limit the possibilities for those young people that are “highest risk”—those who have dropped out of school, ex-offenders, etc. In consideration of what it takes to move young people from where they are to where they can go, we must first acknowledge the way the larger culture and, to some extent, the policies and programs we develop perpetuate common perceptions. Despite the odds facing Anthony and others like him, teachers, practitioners, advocates, and policymakers must begin to envision multiple pathways of success and assume their roles in supporting disadvantaged youth to reach their full potential.

TEENS: DOES ANYBODY CARE? 4 (2008), available at http://www.northeastern.edu/clms/wp-content/uploads/The_Continued_Collapse_of_the_Nations_Teen_Job_Market.pdf.

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ Caroline Ratcliffe & Signe-Mary McKernan, *Childhood Poverty Persistence: Facts and Consequences*, THE URBAN INST. 8, Figure 5 (2010), <http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/412126-child-poverty-persistence.pdf>.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 6-7.

⁵⁵ Algernon Austin, Dir., Program on Race, Ethnicity and the Econ., Testimony before H.R. Committee on Education and Labor: Ensuring Economic Opportunities for Young Americans 4 (Oct. 1, 2009), available at <http://democrats.edworkforce.house.gov/sites/democrats.edworkforce.house.gov/files/documents/111/pdf/testimony/20091001AlgernonAustinTestimony.pdf>.

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ See JOHN P. KRETZMANN & JOHN L. MCKNIGHT, *BUILDING COMMUNITIES FROM THE INSIDE OUT: A PATH TOWARD FINDING AND MOBILIZING A COMMUNITY'S ASSETS* (1993) (containing additional information on definition of assets-based approaches to community building strategies).

Dismantling Perceptions: Youth are persistent and extremely resilient. Interventions established by well-meaning individuals such as youth service practitioners, policymakers, and advocates, often do not consider the resiliency of youth. In a 2006 national study examining the perspective of high school dropouts, researchers found 88% had passing grades and 74% would have stayed in school if they had to do it over again.⁵⁸ In a Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) survey of nearly 200 youth in thirteen communities that were a part of the Department of Labor Youth Opportunity Program,⁵⁹ it found that of the seventy-nine males of color surveyed, about one-third actively attempted to re-enroll in high school but encountered obstacles.⁶⁰ 72% also said that after dropping out, they spent time looking for work.⁶¹ However, only half of males of color in the survey had jobs between dropping out and enrolling in a youth development/recovery program.⁶²

Have High Expectations: In the same CLASP survey, it was clear that young people, regardless of their educational status, held high aspirations. When asked about their goals for the next five years, 40% expressed an intention to attend college and 65% had identified a career area, such as mechanical engineering, nursing, dental hygiene, business, criminal justice, social work, journalism, mortuary science, and forensic science.⁶³ Even though many of the survey participants had brushes with the law or had dropped out of high school, they did not lower the expectations they had for themselves. On a related note, researchers found that low expectations held by adults were in sharp contrast to the high expectations students had for themselves. In a survey of dropouts, 69% reported not feeling motivated or inspired and indicated they would have liked to have been inspired.⁶⁴

Actively Remove Stigmas: To overcome barriers and place youth on a path toward career success, practitioners must work to actively remove stereotypes. For instance, when dealing with young offenders, employers may have a sense of fear or apprehension based on a youth's involvement in the juvenile justice system.⁶⁵ Program staff are often responsible for labeling

⁵⁸ JOHN M. BRIDGELAND ET AL., CIVIC ENTERPRISES, THE SILENT EPIDEMIC: PERSPECTIVE OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS 4 (2006), http://www.americaspromise.org/~media/Files/Resources/the_silent_epidemic_report-RES.ashx.

⁵⁹ The Youth Opportunity Initiative funded 36 high poverty rural and urban communities from 2000-2005 to improve education and labor market outcomes for youth ages fourteen to twenty-one. An independent evaluation, released by the Department of Labor in 2008, found positive results, noting that grantees were able to increase educational attainment, Pell Grant receipt, labor market participation, and employment rates and earnings for more than 90,000 youth. See LINDA HARRIS, CTR. FOR LAW AND SOC. POLICY, LEARNING FROM THE YOUTH OPPORTUNITY EXPERIENCE (2006), available at <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/0514.pdf> 2006 (containing background and history of the Youth Opportunity Grant Program administered by the Department of Labor).

⁶⁰ RHONDA TSOI-A-FATT, CTR. FOR LAW AND SOC. POLICY, IN THEIR OWN WORDS: WHAT YOUNG MALES OF COLOR SAY ABOUT DROPPING OUT AND BEING RECONNECTED, available at <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/documents/files/InTheirOwnWordsPresentation.pdf>.

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ RHONDA TSOI-A-FATT, CTR. FOR LAW AND SOC. POLICY, IN THEIR OWN WORDS: WHAT YOUNG MALES OF COLOR SAY ABOUT DROPPING OUT AND BEING RECONNECTED (FULL RESULTS OF SURVEY) (forthcoming 2012).

⁶⁴ BRIDGELAND, *supra* note 58.

⁶⁵ NAT'L COUNCIL OF JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT JUDGES, OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR YOUTH IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM: A PRACTICAL GUIDE 3 (2005), available at <http://www.pcenj.org/>

youth as “troubled” or dropouts, which can influence the behaviors of employers.

The expectations and perceptions we have for youth of color with limited education and skills are inextricably linked to the types of policies and programs designed to impact their future.

IV. MOVING A YOUTH WORKFORCE AGENDA: WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

The precipitous decline in youth employment, particularly for youth of color, is not an overnight phenomenon. While it is true that the Great Recession of 2007 exacerbated the decline in work prospects for all younger workers, it is also true that for decades, employment rates for African-American and Latino males have trailed behind their white counterparts.

In the face of obvious labor force needs, over the past two decades the federal share of youth activities workforce dollars has decreased by an astounding 73%.⁶⁶ Zuckerman argues that besides the establishment of the Youth Employment Demonstration programs of the 1970’s, America has lacked a coordinated domestic policy response appropriate to the magnitude of employment and education challenges facing its youth, in particular low-income and minority youth.⁶⁷

To know where you are going you must first know where you have been. A brief retrospective of the history of national youth employment policy is essential for two primary reasons: (a) to gain a better understanding of what has worked and the existing strengths of the workforce system, and (b) to understand the context of the economic and political climate and its influence on decision making. Between the 1960’s and 1990’s, Zuckerman identifies the following four major overlapping periods in national workforce policy.⁶⁸

The Formative Years: National policy focused on problems in depressed areas through the passage of the Area Redevelopment Act of 1961, the first post-World War II job training legislation.⁶⁹ A focus was placed on training residents for entry-level jobs.⁷⁰ The Area Redevelopment Act preceded the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962 (MDTA), which was primarily an adult training system, though youth could be served and received a minimal training allowance, and funding was available for experimental and demonstration projects.⁷¹ Key highlights of this period were the emergence of robust youth jobs programs in economically depressed communities such as Harlem, New Haven, Philadelphia, and Chicago.⁷² These programs focused on providing access and opportunity for poor urban youth, which included community-based services, paid work experiences, on-the-job training, business

clientImages/39657/JJ%20Employment%20Barriers.pdf.

⁶⁶ Figure is based on appropriations for employment and training programs through Job Training Partnership and Workforce Investment Acts from 1999 – 2010. See U.S. DEP’T OF LABOR, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING ADMINISTRATION, SUMMARY OF BUDGET AUTHORITY, FY 1984 TO 2009, available at <http://www.doleta.gov/budget/docs/tepbah.pdf>; U.S. DEP’T OF LABOR, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING ADMINISTRATION, SUMMARY OF APPROPRIATION BUDGET AUTHORITY, FISCAL YEAR 2011, available at [http://www.doleta.gov/budget/docs/11appr\\$.pdf](http://www.doleta.gov/budget/docs/11appr$.pdf).

⁶⁷ ALAN ZUCKERMAN, NAT’L YOUTH EMP’T COAL., THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME: THE EVOLUTION AND DEVOLUTION OF YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS 303 (2010), available at http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/74_sup/ydv_9.pdf.

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 303-17.

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 304.

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² *Id.* at 305.

involvement, and efforts to eradicate discrimination in the workplace.⁷³ Additionally, national workforce programs were essential components of the Johnson Administration's anti-poverty agenda—in this period emerged the Job Corps, Neighborhood Youth Corps, and Summer Youth Employment Program.⁷⁴

Coordination & Control Period: This period (from the mid 1960s to the late 1970s) was characterized by a lack of local coordination and competition among local public agencies and community-based organizations, which resulted in the passage of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973 (CETA).⁷⁵ Coordination and joint planning were key goals of this period and states were given primary control of activities through formula-driven block grants.⁷⁶ Additionally, a jobs-first philosophy was employed for youth and adults.⁷⁷ One of the chief premises of this philosophy was that work keeps young people busy and out of trouble.⁷⁸ As a result, few resources were devoted to education, training, and supportive services.⁷⁹ Basic central youth development principles and elements we now take for granted were often overlooked and not an intentional part of program design, though some programs did incorporate universal youth development principles, such as leadership development and strong relationships with adult coaches/mentors.⁸⁰

Youth Demonstration Era: Initiated with the passage of the Youth Employment Demonstration Projects Acts of 1977 (YEDPA), this was the first attempt at national comprehensive youth employment policy.⁸¹ The employment and training needs of youth were not an afterthought of broader workforce policy; instead, attention was paid to their unique needs.⁸² Policymakers of this era believed job creation was key, and this belief was matched with significant resources— six billion dollars in 1979, which is nearly four billion more than the most recent appropriations for youth employment and training programs in 2011.⁸³ Programs were coordinated by the U.S. Department of Labor and, in part, guided by the understanding that programs must move beyond just providing work and work experience—there needed to be increased results for long-term training outcomes, and the economy needed to create more jobs.⁸⁴

Less Money, Less Time, Less Impact: The 1980's brought about a time of cynicism for federal job training programs, and CETA was eliminated.⁸⁵ The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) was passed in 1982, and with its passage also came radical defunding for federal job training by an estimated 64%.⁸⁶ JTPA did little building on the lessons learned from the past.⁸⁷

⁷³ ZUCKERMAN, *supra* note 67, at 305.

⁷⁴ *Id.* at 308.

⁷⁵ *Id.* at 309-10.

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 310.

⁷⁷ *Id.* at 311.

⁷⁸ *Id.*

⁷⁹ ZUCKERMAN, *supra* note 67, at 311.

⁸⁰ *Id.* at 312.

⁸¹ *Id.* at 313.

⁸² *Id.*

⁸³ *Id.*

⁸⁴ *Id.*

⁸⁵ ZUCKERMAN, *supra* note 67, at 315.

⁸⁶ *Id.*

⁸⁷ *Id.* at 316.

Themes dominating this era included a popular shift to cut the domestic budget, elimination of public service employment, the introduction of local planning councils with dominant involvement by business, and the inclusion of national performance standards and targets.⁸⁸ Two hallmark youth programs, Jobs Corps and the Summer Youth Employment Program, were spared by an outcry of public and political support.⁸⁹ The chief consequence of this paradigm shift resulted in less involvement of community-based organizations and diminished service levels for hard-to-serve youth. In contrast, one could argue in the formative years of national employment policy following WWII, federal policy was designed to target the most disadvantaged.

For the past thirteen years, national workforce policy has been guided by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), passed in 1998.⁹⁰ WIA represented an overhaul to federal employment and training. While there were several transformations made, two core changes were the creation of local workforce investment boards and the one-stop system.⁹¹ WIA built on some of the reforms and philosophies of previous federal policy, and local workforce investment boards were created that had strong employer involvement to ensure coordination and to maximize impacts.⁹² WIA was grounded in a theory of universal (not targeted) access to job training, search, and placements, and thus instituted the one-stop system to serve all workers, not just those with the greatest need or highest barriers to employment.⁹³ With respect to youth, WIA promised comprehensive reform of the youth delivery system, infusion of youth development principles, longer-term intensive services, strategic and collaborative approaches, and building capacity in high-poverty areas.⁹⁴ There was a required focus on out-of-school youth, youth development elements, and specific youth performance standards were created.⁹⁵ Local youth councils were established for planning and distributing youth formula funding.⁹⁶ One of the most significant changes of WIA was the establishment of Youth Opportunity Grants (YOG). With an initial \$250 million investment, YOGs targeted high-poverty communities and were designed to establish cross-system approaches to serve communities' neediest youth, including high school dropouts, with comprehensive interventions that led to jobs, secondary, and post-secondary credentials.⁹⁷ As a result of an appropriations trigger embedded in the legislation, the YOG program only administered one round of five year grants to thirty-six communities from 2000 to 2005.⁹⁸ In spite of being short-lived, the YOG program yielded positive outcomes for low-income youth and saw significant gains with youth of color.⁹⁹

⁸⁸ *Id.* at 315.

⁸⁹ *Id.*

⁹⁰ Workforce Investment Act, 29 U.S.C. § 2801 (1998).

⁹¹ ZUCKERMAN, *supra* note 67, at 319.

⁹² *Id.*

⁹³ HARRIS, *supra* note 59, at 11.

⁹⁴ Linda Harris, Dir. Youth Policy, Ctr. for Law and Soc. Policy, Presentation to the Working for Change Forum: Opportunity to Rethink the Nation's Youth Delivery System (2009), available at <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/working-for-change-new-2003.pdf>.

⁹⁵ HARRIS, *supra* note 59, at 2.

⁹⁶ *Id.* at 11.

⁹⁷ *Id.* at 12.

⁹⁸ *Id.* at 13.

⁹⁹ *Id.* at 2.

Where are we now? Doing more with less, the reemergence consolidation, and skepticism about national workforce programs: The WIA has been up for reauthorization for eight years. Regrettably, congressional and administrative leadership has been deficient, and progress toward reauthorization has repeatedly stalled. The current political climate—congressional gridlock, opposing views on the role of the federal government, a preoccupation with cutting the domestic budget, and skepticism about employment and training programs—harkens back to the policy environment that dominated the 1980's and permeated the consciousness of many national leaders. There is incredible focus on supposed duplication among adult and youth job training programs, with little regard to examining the unique purpose, beneficiaries, and implementation of those programs.¹⁰⁰ What is more, employment and training programs have been continually targeted for severe cuts during the past two budget cycles for fiscal years 2011 and 2012.¹⁰¹

Youth employment and training under the WIA system did receive a significant infusion of funding (\$1.2 billion) in 2009 through the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act,¹⁰² which resulted in successful implementation of a federal summer and year-round youth employment program, which served more than 370,000 youth, ages fourteen to twenty-four.¹⁰³ After several attempts to reinstate this funding, Congress failed to pass legislation to ensure such a successful initiative was sustained. Summer work experience is significant, but we cannot simply infuse summer-only dollars into the workforce system and expect to reverse the negative consequences of dramatically declining federal youth workforce investments.

V. COMMUNITY INTERVENTION STRATEGY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL POLICY

A comprehensive national workforce policy that is not beholden to political whims and is not a short-term quick fix is fundamental to tackling the present imperative confronting disadvantaged youth in this nation. Moving a youth workforce agenda takes an all-hands-on-deck approach for community stakeholders and those who directly touch the lives of youth. The intent of a community intervention strategy is to assemble resources from those stakeholders to provide the level of service necessary to spur successful transition to the labor market. There is no one system responsible for the youth who do not have high school diplomas and are out of school and out of work. Consequently, it is incumbent upon all systems to work together to provide a seamless system of education, workforce, and social supports to ensure vulnerable youth do not continue to fall through the cracks.

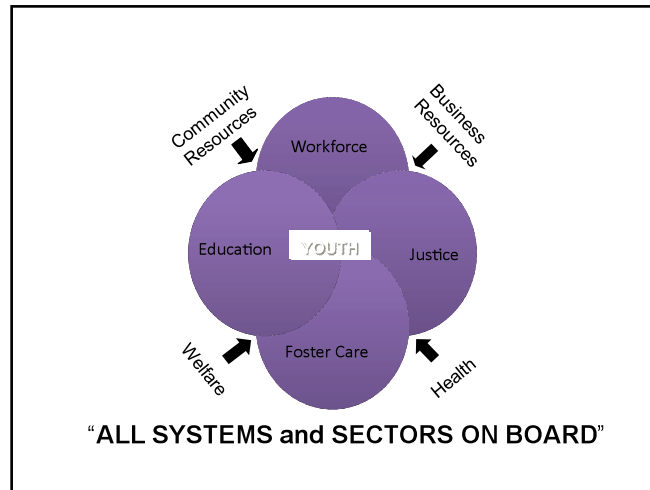
¹⁰⁰ Evelyn Ganzglass, Dir., Workforce Dev. Ctr. for Law and Soc. Policy, Testimony before H.R. Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training: Hearing on Removing Inefficiencies in the Nation's Job Training Programs 2-10 (May 11, 2011), *available at* <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/Removing-Inefficiencies-in-the-Nations-Job-Training-Programs.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ U.S. DEP'T OF LABOR, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING ADMINISTRATION, FY 2012 BUDGET IN BRIEF, *available at* www.doleta.gov/budget (last visited Jan. 16, 2012).

¹⁰² American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Pub. L. No. 111-5, 123, Stat. 115.

¹⁰³ *The American Jobs Act*, <http://www.americanjobsact.com/pathways-to-work.html> (last visited Jan. 21, 2012); CTR. FOR LAW AND SOC. POLICY, AMERICAN RECOVERY AND REINVESTMENT ACT: TWO YEARS LATER: IMPACT OF SELECT ARRA PROGRAMS ON LOW-INCOME WORKERS & FAMILIES (2011), *available at* http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/ARRA_2011Update_Feb17_FINAL.pdf (containing more information on the ARRA funded summer and year-round jobs for youth programs).

Figure One



In its publication, “Building Pathways to Postsecondary Success for Low Income Young Men of Color,”¹⁰⁴ CLASP identifies the key components of a community intervention strategy. It identifies elements in two categories: *programmatic interventions* and *system building*.¹⁰⁵ The programmatic interventions category provides a micro-level analysis of the core components requisite to build hard and soft skills for youth infused with commonly accepted youth development values.¹⁰⁶ The system-building category is a macro-approach to what localities need to have in place for youth to thrive.¹⁰⁷ These approaches are not mutually exclusive; rather they have a reciprocal relationship. Note, the programmatic intervention components outlined do not name specific “program models,” recognizing that a variety of youth program approaches can be effective. The value of the system-building components is indispensable to a comprehensive community intervention strategy. Good programs are just that. They do not have the capacity to deal with the challenges in high-poverty communities at scale or the ability to intentionally strategize across public systems and garner the same level of financial and policy influence. The diagram below “shows the interplay among these components.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Linda Harris & Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, *Building Pathways to Postsecondary Success for Low-Income Young Men of Color*, in *CHANGING PLACES: HOW COMMUNITIES WILL IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF BOYS OF COLOR* 233, 247–51 (Christopher Edley Jr. & Jorge Ruiz de Velasco eds., 2010), available at <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/postsecondaryyouthofcolor.pdf>.

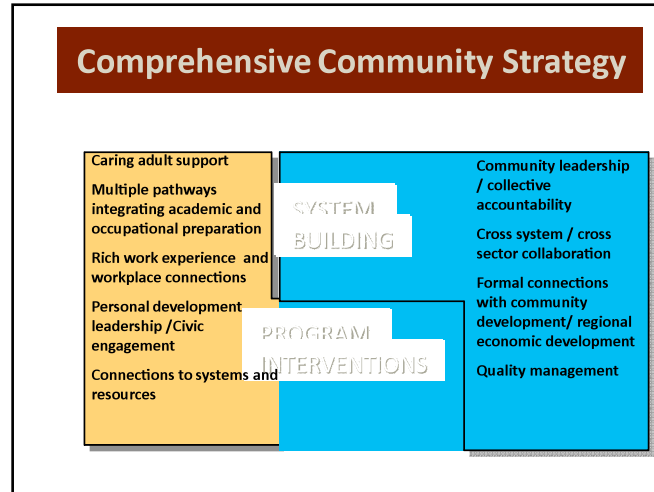
¹⁰⁵ *Id.* at 248.

¹⁰⁶ *Id.* at 249.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*

¹⁰⁸ *Id.*

Figure Two

*“Getting it Right”*

High-poverty communities, especially in urban areas, have had at least four decades of experience with innovating and understanding what interventions work for out-of-school youth of color. Over the past decade, many of these same communities have had the ability to think strategically and comprehensively plan and provide services across youth-serving public systems, community resources, and business through the Youth Opportunity Movement initiated in 2000.

Spotlight on Philadelphia:

The Philadelphia story can be characterized in three ways: broad community mobilization, planning, and leadership. For more than ten years, “the City of Philadelphia, the School District of Philadelphia, the Youth Council and the Workforce Investment Board (WIB) have analyzed data, designed models and built systems to address the needs of youth and young adults for high-quality education, training and employment opportunities. These efforts continue to flourish.”¹⁰⁹ The development and success of Project U-Turn is an example of an effective community-wide systemic effort designed to stem the city’s dropout crisis and make progress toward positive outcomes for young people. This city-wide campaign focused public attention on Philadelphia’s dropout crisis and brought together community stakeholders representing the school district, city agencies, foundations, youth-serving organizations, parents, and young people themselves¹¹⁰—the embodiment of an all hands on deck approach. “The right people are those in leadership—whether public, private, not-for-profit, community, or foundation representatives—

¹⁰⁹ SARA HASTINGS ET AL., CTR. FOR LAW AND SOCIAL POLICY, BUILDING A COMPREHENSIVE YOUTH EMPLOYMENT DELIVERY SYSTEM: EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE 43 (2010), available at <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/Youth-EmploymentSystems.pdf>.

¹¹⁰ *Id.* at 13.

who can commit or substantially influence their respective agencies or sectors.”¹¹¹ Project U-Turn spurred leadership to action, following careful analysis of the young people that dropped out of school, their needs and experiences, and the availability and quality of strategies that would put them back on track towards education and labor market achievement. Some of Philadelphia’s initial accomplishments from 2007 through 2009 include establishing new Accelerated High Schools, a Bridge Program, and a Re-Engagement Center for former dropouts.¹¹² Even more, the strategy has also facilitated the expansion of credit recovery programs, now available to more than 3,000 under-credited students.¹¹³

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL POLICY: FEDERALLY FUNDED YOUTH RECOVERY AND RE-ENGAGEMENT SYSTEM

A community intervention strategy should be supported with resources and effective guidance at the national level. The cumulative effect of four decades of evolving workforce policy, coupled with the lessons learned from decades of local implementation, should be the compass for current and future youth workforce policy. Not to be forgotten is thoughtful consideration of the influence of contextual factors—devastating youth employment participation and high school graduation rates (especially among youth of color), increased postsecondary demands of the emerging labor force, and the impending shift in the demographics of the American workforce. Federal action should be positioned to support community leadership and innovation.

Accordingly, national investments should:

- **Target** communities of high youth distress and serve disconnected and high-risk youth.
- **Build Community Capacity** to create and/or strengthen a comprehensive delivery system and leverage community and public resources.
- **Create Multiple Pathways**¹¹⁴ that blend education, training, and support, leading to secondary and post-secondary credentials.
- **Greatly Expand Work Experience** including subsidized jobs, internships, on-the-job training, summer, and transitional jobs.

Cornerstone pieces of youth legislation, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)¹¹⁵ and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA),¹¹⁶ can provide pivotal

¹¹¹ LINDA HARRIS, CTR. FOR LAW AND SOCIAL POLICY, BUILDING PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS FOR LOW INCOME YOUNG MEN OF COLOR: A COMMUNITY INTERVENTION STRATEGY 4 (2010), available at <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/community-intervention-strategy-excerpt.pdf>.

¹¹² PROJECT U-TURN @ 2.5, PHILADELPHIA YOUTH NETWORK, BROADENING AND DEEPENING THE WORK: AN UPDATE TO THE COMMUNITY 2 (2009), available at http://www.pyninc.org/downloads/uturn_progress_09_high_res.pdf.

¹¹³ *Id.*

¹¹⁴ See RHONDA TSOI-A-FATT, CTR. FOR LAW AND SOC. POLICY, REAUTHORIZING ESEA: CONSIDERATIONS FOR DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY (2010), available at <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/ESEA-Recommendations2010.pdf> (containing definition of multiple education pathway strategies for out-of-school and disadvantaged youth).

¹¹⁵ Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (1965).

¹¹⁶ Workforce Investment Act, 29 U.S.C. § 2801 (1998).

launching points for seeding and establishing an exhaustive set of youth policies that will build on the existing youth service delivery and education infrastructure in local areas. Congressional reauthorizations of both ESEA and WIA will send a signal that young people living on the margins and those at imminent risk of disconnecting from the mainstream are the nation's responsibility and their issues deserve a multi-faceted federal response. The Department of Labor in partnership with the Departments of Education, Justice, and Health and Human Services, can anchor a broad approach to solving these challenges.

Specifically, ESEA must place greater emphasis on reforming the nation's secondary school system, especially in high-poverty and underperforming districts. For far too long, federal response and intervention in education has not been adequately focused on turning around high schools and implementing a variety of strategies targeted to ensure students that are off-track have the opportunities to get back on-track. What is more, school reform efforts without deliberate forethought to institute recuperative strategies of students no longer attached to the high school system will do little to transform our overall education system. While this paper is focused primarily on workforce policy and strategies, it is critical to signify the essential role of the local education system in a transformative community intervention strategy. State and local education agencies must implement policies to: (a) account for their high school dropouts, (b) plan for dropout recovery strategies—outreach and re-enrollment, multiple options for completion, partnerships for wrap-around services, and connections to post-secondary and work opportunities—in collaboration with other youth-serving systems and community-based organizations, and (c) target dedicated funding to dropout recovery.

To radically influence the labor market and life chances of out-of-school and out-of-work youth and those existing on the margins, a complete overhaul of WIA youth provisions is unavoidable. This requires allowing local workforce areas the flexibility, incentive, and resources necessary to assess and plan strategically in support of older youth and those with limited education and skill level. WIA should be seen as a vehicle for job creation and workforce development that, when implemented in tandem with ESEA and other pieces of legislation that guide youth career and education, can drive reform, innovation, and positive outcomes for youth. The following recommendations focus on federal improvements that would allow increased opportunities for disconnected youth to experience and succeed at education and labor market outcomes through WIA.

- Strengthen youth provisions within Youth Activities formula and other targeted youth funding streams to support local communities in providing comprehensive programming designed to reach hardest-to-serve youth—those that have dropped out of high school and other high-need youth.¹¹⁷ Thus, require at least 50% of WIA Youth Activities formula funds allocated to local areas be used to serve youth ages fourteen to twenty-four in these high-risk categories and those who have dropped out of high school.
- Direct funding to high-poverty communities (those with youth unemployment and high school graduation rates below the state average) to allow community partnerships, led by a youth council or other appropriately designated entity, to play a strategic role in implementing comprehensive approaches to youth

¹¹⁷ Young people in disadvantaged situations, ages sixteen to twenty-four, including those who left secondary school without receiving a high school diploma, those at risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, youth detached from the labor market, runaway and homeless youth, youth in foster care and those aging out of care, formerly incarcerated and court involved youth and young people with disabilities.

service delivery at the local level. New and existing services would be integrated into an intentional community-wide engagement and dropout recovery system for high-risk youth, such as job training, education, comprehensive support services, leadership development, and work experience.

- Create a separate funding stream to offer formal connections to the world of work through a broad range of subsidized work experience options—internships, youth corps, summer and year-round jobs, pre-apprenticeships, subsidized, and transitional jobs.
- Strengthen provisions that will support Youth Councils (or other appropriately designated entities) to play the strategic role in implementing comprehensive approaches to youth service delivery at the local level.

VII. MOVING THE AGENDA

All community stakeholders have a role to play. The following are steps advocates can take nationally and locally to ensure young people categorized at highest-risk and hard-to-serve have equal access to quality education and employment opportunities:

- Build and strengthen relationships with members of Congress.
- Push for the reauthorization of WIA and ESEA.
- Actively work to change attitudes and perceptions about low-income youth of color.
- Encourage systems to think differently about how they use current resources.

Lastly, you can leverage your influence to ask critical questions of your workforce investment board and other local youth-serving systems:

- What are the levels of need, gaps in service, and service levels for disconnected youth of color in your community?
- Are the juvenile justice and child welfare agencies in your community working with the local education agency and the workforce board to direct resources and strategically plan for education and workforce pathways that lead to secondary and post-secondary credentials?
- What is the availability of quality alternative education options for older youth in your community?

It is a matter of equity. For over twenty years, economists and labor market analysts have been sounding the alarm. The American way of life—“*our economy, national security, and social cohesion*”¹¹⁸—is at alarming risk if serious attention is not devoted to the development of comprehensive policies and programs that address the needs of all youth, especially minorities and the most disadvantaged. Unless their needs are addressed through a coordinated national policy effort, youth and young adults—especially youth of color, those with limited education and job skills—will continue to be left behind and will be locked out of opportunity when the economy fully recovers and for decades to come.

¹¹⁸ Linda Harris, *What's a Youngster to Do? The Education and Labor Market Plight of Youth in High-Poverty Communities*, CLEARINGHOUSE REV. J. OF POVERTY L. AND POL'Y 126, 126 (2005) (quoting The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship).