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Building Better Programs for Disconnected Youth

MDRC is dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through our research, we seek to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs. As part of our “Looking Forward” series, we provide policymakers with memos that suggest ways to make progress on critical issues.

Bottom line: Nationally, more than one in four high school freshmen does not graduate in four years; in the 50 largest U.S. cities, the dropout rate is closer to 50 percent. Although many of these young people eventually seek to continue their education, a sizable number of dropouts (and many high school graduates) become seriously disconnected from both school and work. The long-term prospects for these young people are extremely poor. The population of disconnected youth is diverse, meaning that a range of different approaches is needed to reengage this group of young people. The research evidence on the effectiveness of such programs is relatively thin and the results are mixed, but there are some promising findings — and a resurgence in political interest — on which to build.

What Do We Know?

Too many young people are disconnected from the worlds of school and work, putting them at serious risk for getting into trouble today and not succeeding in the future.

- Recent estimates suggest that about 17 percent of young people between the ages of 16 and 24 — about 6.7 million people — are neither working nor in school (this figure includes both dropouts and high school graduates). The Great Recession and the slow economic recovery have also exacerbated this disconnection for young workers.
- Besides their difficulty in finding jobs, disconnected youth are more likely to have other poor outcomes, like nonmarital births and criminal justice involvement. One in 10 young male high school dropouts — and one in four young black male dropouts — is either in jail or juvenile detention at any point in time.

Young high school dropouts are a diverse group and their disconnection from school is highly dynamic. Most high school dropouts do not stay persistently disconnected. Nearly two-thirds of dropouts obtain a diploma or a GED credential within eight years after their scheduled graduation date. Even among dropouts from the lowest socioeconomic group, more than 40 percent eventually obtain a GED or a diploma, which suggests that an even larger proportion *attempt* to reengage.

Several large national programs that address the needs of disconnected youth have had some encouraging results. The best-known programs targeting high school dropouts are national programs or networks, such as the Job Corps, YouthBuild, Service and Conservation Corps, and the National Guard Youth ChalleNge program. These programs offer various combinations of education (usually targeting the GED), vocational training, work experience, and youth development activities; some operate in a residential setting. All of these national programs have been subject to rigorous evaluations using random assignment designs and all found at least some positive results (the YouthBuild evaluation is still underway).

For example, National Guard Youth ChalleNge, a 17-month youth development program for high school dropouts, achieved a number of positive results. MDRC found that youth who had access to the program were more likely than those in a control group to have passed the GED exam, earned college credits, and to be working three years after enrollment. These positive results provided the necessary evidence to support an expansion and increase in federal investment in the program.

There is a growing focus on models that seek to connect dropouts with postsecondary education or training. A large number of youth enroll in Adult Basic Education or GED preparation programs at local community organizations, libraries, or community colleges. Improving the quality of these programs should be a top priority, as studies have shown that people who earn a GED do not fare as well in the labor market as those who earn a high school diploma. Some models are seeking to build tighter linkages between GED preparation programs and postsecondary education and careers. A model called GED Bridge at LaGuardia Community College in New York City, which redesigns GED instruction around occupational themes and provides help with the transition into college, has shown very promising results in a small-scale random assignment study, with large increases in GED receipt and enrollment into postsecondary schooling. Another model, Gateway to College, targets dropouts who have relatively strong academic skills and helps them complete high school and begin college simultaneously. Gateway operates at 35 colleges in 20 states and is embarking on a rigorous evaluation.

At the other end of spectrum, many high school dropouts have extremely low reading levels and cannot qualify for most of these programs, so there is a pressing need for new approaches to serve this group of youth and address their learning needs. The societal costs of their failure to complete school and find gainful employment are very high.

What's Next?

The first policy option should be to prevent young people from dropping out of school in the first place (see MDRC's memos on education). But once youth become disconnected, states and localities need assistance to develop effective programs. In fact, in recent years, several big-city mayors have launched ambitious initiatives to create new systems to track and serve disconnected youth.

A resurgence of interest in disconnected youth at the federal level began with the birth of the White House Council for Community Solutions, which erected a platform for policymakers to discuss ways to create opportunities for youth who are out of school and not working. The Aspen Institute, taking its lead from the federal government, developed a similar youth-focused initiative, and larger national campaigns like Opportunity Nation have just been launched. In addition, some cities have made youth a major priority; for example, Portland created multiple programmatic options for at-risk youth and excellent coordination of services.

The federal government continues to play an important role — providing funding, compiling best practices, and supporting research. High priorities for future development and testing include: new models of GED instruction that can raise pass rates and promote connections to postsecondary education or training, innovative approaches for teaching youth who have very low basic skills and cannot qualify for GED-focused programs, work experience or internship models — perhaps contingent on school engagement — that can help disadvantaged youth build work readiness skills in a historically weak labor market, and outreach strategies for youth who are deeply disconnected and avoid voluntary programs. Finally, there is a pressing need for creative thinking about how to ensure stable support for youth programs at the local level, perhaps by integrating second-chance programming into regular K-12 funding streams.