



Expanding Education Options for Struggling Students and Disconnected Youth

Lessons from the National Youth Employment Coalition Learning Exchanges

January 2009

Background

In 2008, the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) convened teams of local and state leaders representing 13 communities in 10 states for cross-site meetings focused on developing expertise and building capacity to re-engage youth who are struggling in or have dropped out of high school and to connect them to education and career opportunities. The NYEC Learning Exchanges, supported by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, offered local and state leaders an opportunity to step out of their day-to-day context to learn about exemplary policies, practices, and programs; participate in peer-to-peer exchanges with their counterparts in other cities and states; and engage in substantive policy discussions with national experts on the integration of secondary school reform, youth development, and workforce development. Participants in the NYEC Learning Exchanges included mayor's office and other city staff, public school district administrators, directors of youth employment programs, Workforce Investment Board directors, state department of education staff, representatives of community and statewide children/education/youth advocacy organizations, and directors of intermediaries involved at the local or state level.

Participants in the two NYEC Learning Exchanges shared information about how they are attempting to expand education options for struggling students and out-of-school youth, the difficulties they encounter along the way, how they use data to inform decisions about programming and document the need for expanded education options, and the state policies which support this work at the local level. This

document provides a distillation of the major themes discussed in the Learning Exchanges. Full meeting summaries and links to additional resources may be found on the NYEC website (www.nyec.org/).

Why Education Options?

The strength of the American economy depends, in part, on the investments we make to prepare young people for adulthood. Currently, U.S. high schools are not successful in engaging all young people—nearly one-third of American youth drop out of school before obtaining a high school diploma.¹ Students of color have only a 50% chance of completing high school. About five million 16- to 24-year-olds (15%) have left school without obtaining a diploma, are unemployed and face greatly reduced opportunities for future employment.²

Communities are working to reform their high schools in hopes of increasing graduation rates, and local and state leaders are increasingly interested in strengthening their ability to retain and promote students. In addition, many are seeking to re-engage those young people who have fallen off-track to high school graduation and need assistance obtaining a secondary credential so they are prepared for employment and/or postsecondary education. There is increasing awareness that what is needed for all young people to be successful is a range of education options which go well beyond those offered by a traditional high school. These options, which provide students who are struggling in or who have left traditional high schools with the opportunity to complete high school or its equivalent (therefore



obtaining the necessary credentials to enter the workforce or continue with postsecondary education), must be responsive to different students' needs, taking into account various learning styles and life circumstances. An expanded range of options for secondary education should include innovative programs which offer youth:

- schools with low student-to-teacher ratios
- small schools or smaller learning communities within larger schools
- extensive student supports, both academic and social
- schedule flexibility
- career-based programming (e.g., offering internships and work experiences)
- credit-recovery programming
- early college options (i.e., blended high school and college programs)

Most Learning Exchange participants agreed that the goal for all students should be completion of high school or its equivalent so that all students are prepared for postsecondary education. As communities work to expand the options for struggling students and out-of-school youth, they find that they are, in fact, improving secondary education offerings for *all* of their students.

What Communities & States Are Doing to Expand Options for Struggling Students & Disconnected Youth

There are a number of ways communities and states are successfully expanding options for struggling students and disconnected youth. First, they are coordinating efforts among youth-serving entities and identifying leadership to manage this coordination. In addition, they are employing a variety of promising and successful practices and approaches. Finally, they are implementing policies at the local and state levels that support these efforts.

Leadership and Coordination

Participants in the Learning Exchanges identified leadership and coordination as key to meeting the needs of struggling students and out-of-school youth through expanded education options. Strong

leadership and coordination ensures that interagency and cross-system conversations and collaboration continue to move forward. Likewise, there was agreement that having an entity dedicated to dropout prevention and recovery is key. At the local level, communities have fulfilled this need for leadership and coordination for dropout prevention and recovery efforts in different ways, with responsibility resting anywhere from the mayor's office to the public school district to an intermediary organization to a staffed local initiative created for that sole purpose.

Some communities have gone through strategic planning processes or have developed youth master plans with a focus on disconnected youth. Some states have statewide networks of alternative schools and programs. Some encourage regional planning, wherein districts share resources that they might not be able to provide individually.

Many participants identified the importance of partnerships between school districts, community-based organizations (CBOs), and community colleges. School districts should not be expected to "go it alone" to address the problem of large numbers of disconnected youth, they argued, insisting this truly is a community-wide issue. Increasingly, CBOs and community colleges are providing high school completion and equivalency programs, and they are also often part of local youth planning processes.

Programming

Participants in the Learning Exchanges reported that they are utilizing a variety of promising and successful practices and models in their efforts to keep students in school and re-engage those who have fallen off-track to graduation. Some indicated that choices about programming are shaped by data on the struggling student and out-of-school youth population in their area. Their schools and organizations typically offer:

- Small Learning Academies/Small Schools in which students and staff all know and look out for each other
- Individualized attention and programs, with individual learning plans and staff attentive to the particular needs of each young person



- Mechanisms for early detection of problems so that no student “falls through the cracks”
- A focus on positive youth development
- Schedule flexibility, with compressed and expanded schedules and evening programs
- Project-based learning activities that help students make real-world connections to their academic studies
- Attendance and academic performance incentives that keep students focused on their educational goals
- Tutoring as needed for students to help them catch up in math and writing
- Credit recovery and accelerated learning options so students who have fallen behind are able to catch up to their peers

Specific types of programs and models participants indicated their communities and states are employing include:

- Dual enrollment-early college high school models which offer students the opportunity to earn significant credits towards an associate’s degree while completing high school on a community college campus
- On-line and distance learning programs (in some cases statewide programs)
- Nationally-recognized models, such as YouthBuild, Big Picture Company, Diploma plus, and Gateway to College (in some cases as part of a partnership with the Alternative High School Initiative)
- Updated, restructured, and more relevant career and technical education programs

The attempt is to provide a variety of options to meet the varied needs of students.

Supportive Policy Environment

Local and state policy conditions can support (or hinder) the development of education options and meet the needs of struggling students and out-of-school youth. As state education funds represent one of the largest potential funding sources available to support disconnected youth, it is important to analyze

the state policies affecting alternative school and programs’ access to these funds. Learning Exchange participants identified numerous local and state policy conditions supportive of the expansion education pathways to a high school credential or its equivalent.

Participants identified local-level (community/district) policies and practices that support their efforts to expand education options and re-engage young people who have fallen off-track to high school graduation, including:

- Having a superintendent who is supportive of alternative schools/expanded education options
- Creating a data collection system to document where young people are falling off-track and determine the type of programming needed within a portfolio of options
- Developing new schools to add to a district’s portfolio
- Creating multiple re-entry entry points, including community-based programming, for students who have previously dropped out of school
- Establishing 8th to 9th grade bridge programs to ease the transition to high school and ensure students have solid footing in high school from the beginning
- Offering intensive summer programs for struggling students
- Utilizing the “Breaking Ranks” model for high school reform
- Elevating Alternative Education or Education Options Departments to “cluster” status within the school district
- The school district contracting with community-based organizations for alternative high school programs
- Offering industry-recognized certification programs that put graduates in line to obtain living-wage jobs
- Engaging with the Alternative High School Initiative to develop new alternative schools
- Creating engagement centers to provide outreach to dropouts and off-track students
- Identifying dedicated dropout outreach specialists



- Paying close attention to the needs of older youth, youth in juvenile justice system, and youth aging out of the foster care system
- Providing alternatives to residential treatment for youthful offenders
- Linking Adult Basic Education/General Educational Development (ABE/GED) preparation programming to postsecondary education and training (i.e., creating a pipeline)
- Engaging with the National League of Cities Municipal Network on Disconnected Youth (MNDY)
- Engaging with the Communities Coordinating to Reconnect Youth (CCRY) Network
- Engaging with the U.S. Department of Labor Multiple Education Pathways Blueprint Initiative
- Creating a local Connected by 25 initiative
- Creating an alternative education task force
- Organizing a local summit focused on the dropout rate, re-engaging out-of-school youth, teen success, etc.
- Allowing districts to analyze school success with students based on student growth over time, not just one-shot scores on achievement tests
- Offering modified and alternative high school diploma options
- Offering students multiple paths to the same outcome (high school diploma or equivalent)
- Instituting statewide dropout initiatives (usually with a specific target for reduction in the dropout rate)
- Creating P20 or P21 Councils to promote the alignment of youth services from pre-school through postsecondary
- Collaborating across youth-serving systems to coordinate services for youth provided by state agencies and departments

As effective policies are developed and implemented at the local and state levels, there is a growing body of knowledge about “what works” for youth which can inform the national discussion and policymaking at the federal level.

Participants identified state level policies and practices that support their efforts to expand education options and re-engage young people who have fallen off-track to high school graduation, including:

- Clearly defining what is meant by “alternative education” or “education options” and mandating these be offered at the local level
- Detailing how school districts may contract with community-based partners to deliver high school completion and alternative education programming, with delineation of how state education funds should be allocated
- Offering state grants to support existing programs and encourage the development of new programs
- Using a weighted student formula to calculate state education aid to districts
- Creating accurate community and statewide data systems
- Allowing schools to award students high school credit for demonstrated competency or proficiency in a subject (rather than solely for “seat-time”)

Challenges Communities & States Are Facing As They Seek to Expand Options for Struggling Students & Disconnected Youth

Learning Exchange participants identified a number of policy conditions which pose challenges to expanding education options for struggling students and out-of-school youth, including the significant needs of the students being served and lack of capacity to meet these needs, as well as the difficulty of accessing resources to serve the population.

At the local level, schools, programs, and districts are serving many students with educational needs and challenges that go well beyond the classroom. Many students are living in poverty or face large personal hurdles to engaging in education. Many have been out of school for a long time before returning, often with low literacy and numeracy skills. Learning Exchange participants expressed concern that because there is not enough early detection of students who are struggling in school or with life challenges, schools and youth programs are often doing a lot of “clean up” after



students have fallen very far behind their peers. Learning Exchange participants lamented that the field does not yet have the capacity to meet the needs of disconnected youth, citing lack of enough high-quality schools and programs and a variety of programming, a need for better career and technical education and applied learning programs, and a need for high school completion programming that is separate from the existing adult programming (which in many cases is not appropriate for youth). Participants argued that there is a need for more programs that employ rigorous models but which are flexible enough to meet the varied needs of the struggling student and disconnected youth populations. In addition, participants pointed to the need for good outreach to help young people who have fallen off-track to get back on-track with their education. Too often, they warned, there is not a single source of information and referral for struggling students and out-of-school youth and no one entity is tasked with reaching out to those students who have dropped out of school.

Faced with requirements to demonstrate their success, in most cases as measured by standardized tests, programs serving struggling students and students who have been out of school for long periods of time find themselves at a disadvantage. While these programs are eager to demonstrate their oftentimes remarkable success with a population that has not met success in the traditional education system, they are usually limited in their ability to do so by accountability systems. Learning Exchange participants argued that accountability measures as set forth by states under the No Child Left Behind Act frequently set up a strong disincentive for programs and schools to serve struggling students and out-of-school youth.

At the state level, many Learning Exchange participants noted there is often a lack of clear direction on alternative education, with inconsistent policies leaving the interpretation to individuals who may or may not be inclined toward flexibility. Most participants argued that having a state office dedicated

to the dropout issue is helpful to creating an articulated vision. Along with direction on alternative education, such an office or entity can help the state define its targets for “success” with students in terms of academic and workforce preparation. Without an office dedicated to preventing students from dropping out and reaching those who have already left school, many states lack a clear focus on this important issue and the work of their various youth-serving departments and agencies lacks coordination.

State education funding policies provide further challenges to those working with this population. Limited resources are often not adequate for the level of support needed by students, and while resources might be available to support a student in a traditional high school program, they often are not able to follow that student to an alternative school or program outside of the public school district. What is more, schools may not be able to obtain funding for older students once they “age out” as high school students, in most states at age 21.

Currently, many of the barriers identified by Learning Exchange participants are being

overcome with waivers granted to individual districts or programs. Participants discussed the merits of using this “back door”-type strategy versus the “front door” strategy of seeking legislative change. Successful programs with waivers can lead moves for policy change at the state level. Likewise, successful state policies can serve as a model for federal policy. Learning Exchange participants stressed that many of the policy barriers at the local and state levels are removable—with strong local leadership and the vision to imagine youth-serving systems that are structured differently from most of those in place currently. With understanding about the reasons young people fall off-track to graduation and a sense of urgency about the large numbers of young people who are doing so, they argued, we can change our delivery systems and policies to do a much better job of meeting the needs of all youth. Successful local and state efforts light the path for this needed reform.

There is a need for more programs that employ rigorous models but which are flexible enough to meet the varied needs of the struggling student and disconnected youth populations.



NYEC Learning Exchange Participants

- Tim Aldinger, Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board – Pittsburgh, PA
- Virginia Abdo, Shared Youth Vision Partnership/Michigan Dept. of Labor & Economic Growth, Bureau of Workforce Development – Lansing, MI
- Peggy Atkins, Grand Rapids Public Schools – Grand Rapids, MI
- Vicki Baldwin, Retired, Austin Independent School District – Austin, TX
- Bill Bartle, Pennsylvania Partnership for Children – Harrisburg, PA
- Ruth Bishop, Grand Rapids Community Foundation – Grand Rapids, MI
- Floyd Blair, Connecticut Department for Children and Families – Hartford, CT
- Andrey Bundley, Baltimore City Public Schools – Baltimore, MD
- Linelle Clark-Brown, Austin Independent School District – Austin, TX
- Michele Corey, Michigan’s Children – Lansing, MI
- Jenny Curtin, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education – Malden, MA
- Steve Dobo, Colorado Youth for a Change – Denver, CO
- David Domenici, The Oak Hill Academy – Laurel, MD (Washington, DC)
- Ernest Dorsey, Baltimore Mayor’s office of Employment Development/Youth Opportunity – Baltimore, MD
- Hanif Fazal, Open Meadow Alternative Schools – Portland, OR
- Richard Halpin, American Youth Works – Austin, TX
- Kathy Hamilton, Private Industry Council – Boston, MA
- Linda Harris, Center for Law and Social Policy – Washington, DC
- Sara Hastings, Center for Law and Social Policy – Washington, DC
- Lynn Heemstra, Our Community’s Children – Grand Rapids, MI
- Drew Hinds, Oregon Dept. of Education – Salem, OR
- Judith Jackson, Detroit Youth Foundation – Detroit, MI
- Kurt Johnson, Grand Rapids Public Schools – Grand Rapids, MI
- Mike Kiefer, University of Michigan-Flint – Flint, MI
- Laura Kiesler, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education – Washington, DC
- Karl Lang, High School Initiative, Nashville Public Schools – Nashville, TN
- Susan Lange, Commonwealth Corporation – Boston, MA
- Jan Lindsey, Texas Education Agency – Austin, TX
- Nancy Martin, National Youth Employment Coalition – Washington, DC
- Judith Martinez, Colorado Dept. of Education – Denver, CO
- Joe McLaughlin, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University – Boston, MA
- Rick Miller, Tennessee Alternative Educators Association – Lebanon, TN
- Yazeed Moore, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation – Flint, MI
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- Robert Murphy, Maryland Department of Education – Baltimore, MD
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- Bob Rath, Our Piece of the Pie – Hartford, CT
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- Marilse Rodriguez-Garcia, Boston Public Schools – Boston, MA
- Dolly Roselip, Youth Opportunities Unlimited – Kalamazoo, MI
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- Christina Weeter, National Youth Employment Coalition – Washington, DC
- Ephraim Weisstein, School and Main Institute – Lexington, MA
- Ellen Zinkiewicz, Nashville Career Advancement Center – Nashville, TN

Endnotes

¹ Greene, J.P. & Winters, M.A. (2005, February). *Public high school graduation and college readiness rates: 2001-2002*. Education Working Paper No. 8. New York, NY: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. Swanson, C.B. (2004). *Who graduates? Who doesn't? A statistical portrait of public high-school graduation*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

² Sum, A., Magnum, G. & Taggart, R. (2002). *The young, the restless and the jobless: The case for a national jobs stimulus program targeted on America's young adults*. (Policy Issues Monograph 02-01.) Baltimore, MD: Sar Levitan Center for Social Policy Studies, Johns Hopkins University.