



POLICY BRIEF

Forgotten Youth: Re-Engaging Students Through Dropout Recovery

Introduction

Each year, thousands of Massachusetts students drop out of school. During the 2010-11 school year, for example, this number totaled nearly 7,900.¹ The path forward for these students is difficult, with limited opportunities for sustained career and life success. High school dropouts face fewer prospects for employment, significantly lower earning potential, much higher rates of incarceration, and more health problems. They are far more likely to rely on public assistance than high school graduates.² In a growing global marketplace that increasingly views a high school diploma as the minimum standard for full participation, the decision to leave school and not return presents departing students with few options.

Failing to fully educate the next generation of workers and leaders also has substantial long-term consequences for our shared economic well-being. The average high school non-graduate in Massachusetts imposes a net fiscal burden of nearly \$122,000 over the course of his or her lifetime, realized through cash assistance and other benefits (such as food stamps, healthcare, and child care and housing subsidies).³ In comparison, the average high school graduate will contribute \$344,700 more in taxes than received federal and state aid. The result is a gap of approximately \$467,000.⁴

In response to these enormous individual and societal costs, significant attention has been devoted to reducing the number of students who drop out of school, both nationally and in the Commonwealth. In 2009, Massachusetts set a goal of reducing the state dropout rate by half—from 3.4% to 1.7%—by the 2013-14 school year.⁵ To achieve this goal, several dropout reduction strategies have been introduced in schools and districts. These state- and federally-funded strategies include early identification and support of at-risk students, greater support for students transitioning from 8th to 9th grade, credit recovery, social and emotional support, and community partnerships for college and career readiness.⁶ (See Appendix A for more information about statewide activities, including legislative action.)⁷ In 2010-2011, the statewide dropout rate fell to 2.7%.

Missing from this seemingly comprehensive agenda, however, is a systemic approach to dropout recovery, the act of re-engaging students who have already left school (henceforth: “out-of-school youth”). The Massachusetts Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission produced a specific recommendation for the state to conduct “active recovery, including reaching out to dropouts and providing them with support and alternative pathways to graduation,”⁸ but few districts have the capacity or know-how to effectively re-engage or re-enrollⁱ out-of-school youth, resulting in the neglect of a large number of the school-age population.⁹ Failing to include students who have already left school in dropout reduction programs falls short of our obligation to educate all youth.

i In this document, the term “re-engagement” refers to the process of reaching out to, connecting with, and addressing the needs of out-of-school youth so they can continue their education. “Re-enrollment” refers to the process of re-enrolling students in an educational program that provides a high school diploma or equivalent.

This policy brief, produced with generous support from the Barr Foundation and the Hyams Foundation, presents research that contributes to a growing body of work about dropout recovery. It explores common themes in dropout recovery models across the country, identifies lessons learned and challenges encountered in a district-based dropout recovery center in Massachusetts, and offers considerations—based on literature and research findings—for school and district leaders, community partners, and state policymakers. Lessons learned and challenges are presented as findings of a case study of Boston Public Schools’ Re-Engagement Center, conducted by the Rennie Center in Spring 2012. Building upon a small, but growing body of research, this brief can help establish a framework for dropout recovery work across Massachusetts.

Re-engaging out-of-school youth through dropout recovery

Dropout recovery programs may be implemented by a range of actors (e.g. school districts, workforce boards, community-based organizations, community colleges, adult education systems, or other social service agencies), but are not common.¹⁰ It can be challenging to re-engage out-of-school youth due to a lack of pertinent information about their whereabouts and academic standing; however, research shows that out-of-school youth frequently want to return to school and continue their education, but do not have the knowledge or means to do so.¹¹ Unfortunately, few high-quality educational options are available that meet their needs, and funding structures often do not encourage schools to support re-enrollment.¹² In many cases, the “second chance system” that currently exists to provide out-of-school youth with pathways to a high school diploma and postsecondary and career opportunities suffers from a number of problems, including fragmentation, long-term underinvestment, and marginalization from mainstream policy discussions and decisions.¹³

At issue is that public education reforms aimed at reducing the dropout rate have tended to emphasize prevention efforts designed to keep students enrolled in school, rather than reconnecting with those who have already left. Public schools and districts tend to focus on serving students who regularly attend and are engaged in the school environment. Dropout prevention efforts are integral to serving at-risk youth, but beyond an acknowledgement that out-of-school youth are entitled to an education, few efforts exist to connect with or re-enroll these students.

The process of re-engaging out-of-school youth begins by fully understanding why most students leave school. National research shows the principal factors of dropping out tend to be both academic and non-academic, and include disengagement from coursework, failure to succeed in school, social problems and family responsibilities, a lack of support services for non-academic needs, and infrequent attendance (see text box at right).¹⁵ Therefore, effective re-engagement strategies must address not only prior schooling, but also present solutions to the social, economic, and psychological barriers students may continue to face.¹⁶ This means accounting for individual student differences, employing distinct strategies with different subgroups, and offering learning opportunities that do not look like traditional school environments.¹⁷ Strategies may include evening courses, self-paced learning, partnerships with post-secondary institutions, earning credit for work experience, and flexible scheduling. Overall, there is a greater focus on creating individualized and supportive learning experiences where teachers and staff members act as caring mentors to advocate for each student’s needs.¹⁸

Despite limited attention to the issue of dropout recovery, several large, urban districts across the U.S.—including Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Portland, Oregon—have implemented programs that address the unique needs of out-of-school youth, establishing some common practices not typically seen in traditional educational settings.¹⁹ These programs outline a promising approach to dropout recovery that includes the following:

Most common reasons students leave school before graduation¹⁴

Academic reasons:

- Lack of curriculum that is interesting or relevant to the future
- Poor academic “fit” with school, including mode and pace of instruction
- Failure to succeed in school, including grade retention, difficult school transitions, and weak academic skills
- Chronic absenteeism, causing students to fall behind in schoolwork

Non-academic reasons:

- Life events outside of school, such as health issues, pregnancy and parenting, family concerns, or incarceration
- Negative school climate, including a disruptive or unsafe school environment
- Wanting or needing to work to earn money
- Disciplinary removal from school

- **Maintain a focus on students' future after high school.** Many students who leave high school before graduation do so because of financial obligations. In response, dropout recovery programs focus on youths' future after graduation by using real-world, career-oriented curricula. These programs also integrate or partner with youth employment programs and workforce preparation. Some programs partner with nearby community colleges to incorporate college-level coursework, thus maintaining a focus on future education opportunities.
- **Allow individualized and flexible academic programs.** Out-of-school youth may have several non-academic reasons for leaving school, including pregnancy or childcare, incarceration, health problems, or caring for family members. To address returning students' needs, recovery programs offer flexible schedules and year-round learning, including open-entry and open-exit so youth may begin and finish programs at any time. They also may allow academic credit recovery and accelerated program options. A portfolio of options offers an increased range of program choices, such as online, early morning and evening classes, or dual enrollment with community colleges.
- **Take a needs-based and supportive approach.** Previous negative school experiences may leave out-of-school youth with a lack of motivation, requiring immediate engagement and consistent encouragement to cultivate their initial optimism about returning to school. To do this, dropout recovery programs use needs-based assessments to properly identify and serve returning youth through a case management model. Staffing a program with committed adults is a key element of the work, and recovery programs include well-qualified and committed teachers who assist students in navigating the demands of school and life. These programs also incorporate clear codes of conduct and increase student and parental involvement in education.
- **Integrate or link to community organizations.** Schools and districts are not designed to address the myriad non-academic needs of many out-of-school youth. Recovery programs use extensive support programs and wraparound services—typically through partnerships with community agencies, health centers, statewide services, or community colleges—to ensure all returning students are ready to learn. Many programs also partner with businesses in the surrounding community to provide job training and maintain a focus on post-high school careers.

Districts and schools are increasingly recognizing that the above lessons, learned from programs designed to recover out-of-school youth, can inform broader efforts to prevent students from leaving school. The needs of out-of-school youth are often very similar to the needs of at-risk students still enrolled in school, particularly those who are over 18 and/or far behind in course credits. Strategies employed by dropout recovery programs, such as providing several academic options that allow for multiple pathways toward graduation, may better accommodate the unique, individual challenges faced by students struggling to stay in school. (See Appendix B for an example of a Massachusetts district employing dropout prevention and recovery strategies through multiple pathways.)

In the next section, we present evidence from the Rennie Center's case study of one urban dropout recovery program operating as an independent center. As a dropout recovery program set apart from traditional school settings, this program specializes in addressing the challenges faced by out-of-school youth by providing an appropriate menu of educational options leading to a high school diploma or equivalent. This program, a partnership between the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Private Industry Council, provides a promising approach to re-engaging out-of-school youth that may be applied in other settings.

Methodology for this policy brief

Using a case study approach, this research identifies common practices in dropout recovery and documents the development and operation of the Boston Public Schools' Re-Engagement Center. Data collection involved a review of the literature on dropout prevention and recovery, interviews, observations, and document analysis.

Researchers worked in partnership with the Boston Private Industry Council and Boston Public Schools to refine interview protocols and identify research subjects to ensure successful data collection. In-depth interviews were conducted with Re-Engagement Center staff, the district superintendent and assistant superintendent for high schools, the district director of alternative education options, and other Boston Public School staff members. Interviews were also conducted with key stakeholders, including: community partners, legislators, funders, and Boston School Committee members.

A full list of interviewees can be found in Appendix C. Interviews were audio recorded, and data from interviews were then analyzed for dominant themes. In addition, the research team observed the Re-Engagement Center in its work, as well as collected and analyzed documents to gain a deeper understanding of its policies and procedures.

Boston Public Schools' Re-Engagement Center

The Boston Public Schools' Re-Engagement Center (REC) is one of the few programs, nationally and locally, specifically designed to re-engage out-of-school youth and bring them back on track to graduation. It originated in 2004 when Boston's Mayor Thomas Menino convened the Youth Transitions Task Force, staffed by the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC), to study the "dropout crisis" in Boston and develop and implement an action plan to address it. The Task Force published a study on the issue and presented the following recommendations for change:²⁰

- Better use of data to analyze the problem and target programming;
- Outreach to dropouts and early intervention;
- More alternative pathways to a diploma;
- A more supportive school climate;
- A collaborative approach among schools and agencies;
- Policy and funding provisions to support this work; and
- Piloting new practices based on these recommendations in order to change policy.

In the 2006-2007 school year, the PIC began conducting outreach to out-of-school youth as an action research project of the Youth Transitions Task Force. At the time, the Boston Public Schools (BPS) Student Support office had piloted an initial project in which a guidance counselor called out-of-school youth over the summer to encourage them to return to their high school. After a year of planning with the district, the two organizations initiated *Project Reconnect* as an informal partnership. The PIC hired two former high school dropouts as "street research specialists" to reach out to dropouts and document their stories about what happened when they attempted to re-enroll in school. The two PIC street research specialists informally worked with different BPS offices, such as Guidance and the Family Resource Centers, to gain access to and connect with out-of-school youth. Their outreach revealed that many out-of-school youth wanted to come back to school but did not know how.

In September 2007, BPS completed a strategic analysis of the district's "off-track" youth, which showed predictive factors of dropping out and analyzed the district's capacity to improve prevention and re-enrollment efforts.²¹ The district and strategic partners developed a set of recommendations based on this report, with the goal of planning multiple pathways to better fit the needs of the BPS student population.²² Notably, Dr. Carol Johnson joined the district as Superintendent and prioritized addressing the dropout issue as part of her Acceleration Agenda. Her goal was to substantially increase the graduation rate through initiatives such as online credit recovery and a district-wide "dropout recovery center."²³

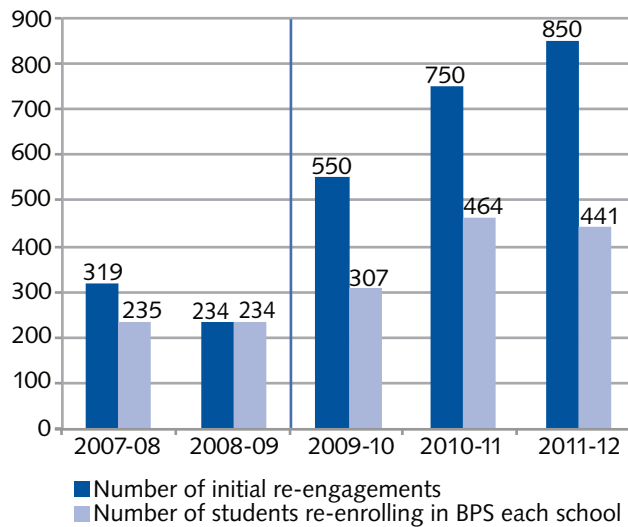
Project Reconnect formally became part of the school system in September 2009, and BPS officially established the Re-Engagement Center (REC) as the district's dropout recovery program. The PIC and BPS worked together in a formal partnership to support and staff the program. The text box on page 6 outlines the process used by the REC to re-engage out-of-school youth.

Available dataⁱⁱ suggests that the REC's tailored approach to working with out-of-school youth has had an important impact. In the two years of the initial *Project Reconnect* effort for which full data is available, 553 youth re-engaged (connected with REC staff), and 469 re-enrolled (formally re-entered the BPS system) in a district school or program. In the three years since the partners started the Re-Engagement Center, the numbers of re-engaged and re-enrolled youth have increased threefold: 2,150 students have re-engaged, and 1,391 have re-enrolled (see Figure A). In the 2011-12 school year alone there were nearly 1,900 out-of-school youth in Boston; over 800 of these youth engaged in an initial 15-minute conversation at the REC, and of these, over 441 re-enrolled in school, and 60 were referred to a GED or adult education program.

ii The data provided here and throughout this policy brief has been collected by the Re-Engagement Center for the purpose of tracking outcomes, improving service delivery, and sharing information. The Rennie Center did not perform any additional analysis on this data and is merely reporting information provided by the REC staff for the purpose of this study.

Importantly, the formation of a formal partnership between the PIC and BPS in September 2009 may have strengthened re-engaged students' "stick rate" (i.e. the percent of students who re-enroll and remain in school through the academic year).ⁱⁱⁱ During the first full year of operation in Boston Public Schools, students who re-enrolled the previous year through Project Reconnect through the REC had a higher stick rate than those students who re-enrolled in traditional district high schools (see Figure B). These outcomes suggest the work of the REC may provide important lessons to inform broader practice in dropout prevention and recovery.

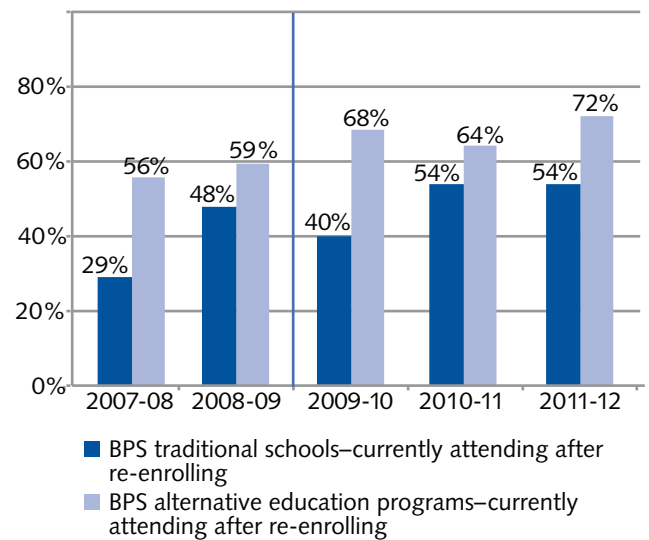
Figure A: Initial re-engagement and enrollment of out-of-school youth through the REC*



*In 2009-10, the REC formally became part of BPS.

*The percentages in this Figure B are based on students who began the school year in September.

Figure B: Rate of first year completion ("stick rate") by youth who re-enrolled in school through the REC**



iii A note about the data above: As seen in Figure B, while the reported "stick rate" has increased over time, a substantial proportion of students do not remain in their assigned school or program through the first year after re-engaging. The REC staff has learned through anecdotal evidence that some students who do not remain through the first year after re-engaging were assigned to schools/programs that did not meet their needs or did not receive the assignment they requested. The REC does not track students who choose to connect with a GED or adult education program, nor do they track students who choose not to attend their assigned school or program.

Current Re-Engagement Center process for re-engaging out-of-school youth

Outreach

- REC receives a list in May of students who have dropped out of BPS.
- REC conducts outreach to out-of-school youth—including recruitment letters, automated phone calls, and personal phone calls—to encourage students to return to school.
- Out-of-school youth interested in re-enrolling in BPS are invited to visit the REC in person.

Intake process

- **Shared experiences:** Upon arrival, staff immediately invite youth to watch a video featuring former dropouts who share stories about why they left school, the financial and social costs of dropping out, and what helped them return.²⁴
- **Adult connection:** REC staff member then meets with the youth to connect with him/her and to identify goals. Staff member attempts to learn about the youth's personal circumstances and aspirations.
 - **Motivational story:** Staff member describes his/her personal story and attempts to connect with youth through similar experiences.
 - **Financial education:** Discussion then focuses on how education relates to the youth's future. Staff member discusses the relationship between academic attainment and income.
- **Transcript review:** Staff member discusses the student's academic status, reviews goals and educational options, and helps guide next steps.
- **District enrollment and school choice:** Once paperwork required by BPS is completed, staff member helps shape school choice decisions:
 - Can the student attend high school full time?
 - Is a GED or adult education program more appropriate, particularly for older students and those further from graduation?
 - Are BPS engagement options appropriate? (See text box on page 8 for more details.)

Choosing the right school or program

- Staff member discusses school and program options with the student. Each student may request up to 5 school choices for re-enrollment. Staff member's advice about choices between traditional or alternative schools is based on:
 - Student's academic status
 - Personal circumstances (location, schedule, etc.)
 - Personal preference
 - Availability of seats
- REC offers students who are awaiting placement opportunities to earn credits through several re-engagement options. Returning seniors may finish their courses in this manner. (See text box on page 8 for more details.)

Assignment and enrollment

- Staff member prepares and brings the required documents to a BPS Family Resource Center so the student can officially become actively enrolled in the system.
- Staff member helps the student make choices that fit his or her academic profile and personal circumstances.

Transition to and persistence in school

- REC offers follow-up supports to some students who re-enroll through the REC and attend a district high school full-time. These activities include: check-in calls, workshops on academic and life skills, school visits, and encouragement.

Graduation

- Once a re-engaged student has fulfilled both district and state requirements, they are eligible to graduate.
- Students re-enrolled in traditional or alternative district schools may participate in the district-wide June graduation.
- Students using engagement options through the REC may participate in the August graduation.

Promising Practices

The Re-Engagement Center (REC) is a dropout recovery center that strives to re-enroll out-of-school youth through outreach, personal connections, and a variety of educational options that support students to graduation. Neil Sullivan, Executive Director of the Boston Private Industry Council explains, “There’s a theory of action embedded in this work: ‘start at the back of the line!’ So much of education reform has looked to get more young people over the academic bar. But it doesn’t get you the ones at the back of the line, and the ultimate back of the line are those who’ve already left school.” Based on this premise, the REC provides a developing and valuable model for other schools and districts striving to better serve all school-age youth. The Rennie Center’s case study of the REC uncovered the following promising practices for dropout recovery.

A robust public-private partnership provides resources and support critical to the Re-Engagement Center’s success. It is important to acknowledge that most school districts have limited capacity to reconnect with students who have left school. Prior to the Boston Private Industry Council’s (PIC) research and outreach, Boston Public Schools (BPS) largely attempted to reach out-of-school youth through targeted phone calls. A large caseload and limited staff capacity, however, prevented significant follow-up, and the effort was difficult to sustain. Furthermore, outreach to out-of-school youth revealed they often were not comfortable returning to their previous environment; yet, youth returning to BPS were directed to re-enroll in the schools from which they left. While district leadership and staff understood the urgency of bringing out-of-school youth back to school, a lack of financial resources, staff time, and experience undermined their efforts.

The emergence of a strong partnership between BPS and the PIC provided a critical turning point in the district’s efforts to more successfully engage out-of-school youth. The district has an established data-tracking system, assessment expertise, an online credit recovery system,²⁵ and an emerging portfolio of innovative education programming for struggling students. In funding several staff positions at the REC, the district also provides an in-depth knowledge of students’ enrollment status and district policies. The PIC’s work is focused on building strong connections between businesses and government, labor, and community organizations to help drive policy change and provide Boston youth and adults with education and employment opportunities.²⁶ The PIC is a powerful advocate for disaffected youth that has vigorously pursued an agenda to lower the high school dropout rate. Plainly, the PIC supports BPS by serving as an effective intermediary for the district and by convening Boston leadership around education and workforce priorities.²⁷ The creative tension resulting from an advocacy organization and a school district working closely together has helped raise awareness of issues that may otherwise go unaddressed.

By pooling their assets, BPS and the PIC have advanced the work of the REC beyond what either organization could accomplish on its own. Both organizations financially support on-site staff members—four from BPS and three from the PIC—leading to a seamless integration of the two organizational cultures. By creating a team focused on the growth and development of out-of-school youth, the partners have effectively expanded the focus of the district’s educational mission to include all school-age youth in Boston. Gail Forbes-Harris, Director of the REC, commends the effort of both partners to create such tight integration: “Many people are afraid to give up ownership of the work in fear of losing something. No one here is afraid to do that; it’s always about the students.”

“There is total transparency about what’s happening at the Re-Engagement Center. I’ve never heard such honesty about what’s actually happening as I do here.”

—Ferdinand Fuentes, Executive Director,
Boston Public Schools’ Educational Options

The Re-Engagement Center is a welcoming and supportive environment that encourages out-of-school youth to re-enroll in school. Through several years of outreach, BPS and the PIC learned that out-of-school youth frequently are not comfortable returning to the school they left. Students leave school for a myriad of reasons, some of which may be present in their former schools. Out-of-school youth who want to continue their education do not know what options are available to them or how to re-enroll in school. To combat this, the REC is a comfortable and supportive environment, purposely situated as a neutral, non-school program staffed by several non-district (PIC) employees. Superintendent Johnson stresses the need for a welcoming environment and flexible program: “If a student wakes up on Tuesday at 7:00 a.m. and decides to re-enroll in school, there has to be a place to go. It can’t be like standing in line to get your license renewed”

More specifically, the REC employs a youth development model, designed to nurture returning students’ developmental assets rather than focusing on reducing risks or preventing problems, with the goal of producing healthy, successful, and contributing adults.²⁸ REC staff are hired based on their ability to connect with and understand the experiences of at-risk youth.

When first meeting with a returning student, staff members share personal stories about dropping out of high school or struggling in school and life. This has bred a culture of trust and respect at the REC that contributes to the welcoming atmosphere. Once students choose to re-enroll in school, the REC offers follow-up and mentoring support to re-enrolled students at some district schools, and has established relationships with community partners—such as mental health providers and child care centers—that are able to provide non-academic wraparound services.

Out-of-school youth who decide to return to school require appropriate re-engagement options. Prior to the formal establishment of the Re-Engagement Center, *Project Reconnect* street research specialists learned that returning out-of-school youth benefit from non-traditional programs, settings, and educational options. As Neil Sullivan of the PIC explains, “Our average student profile is 17 years old with no high school credits, or 19 years old and a sophomore status. They’re over-aged, and therefore you need an educational program that can deal with that.” Placing an older re-enrolled student back into a district high school alongside 14- and 15-year olds is unlikely to be successful.

Although re-enrolling in a traditional high school is always an option, the majority of returning students now request alternative education high schools or programs, and many utilize one or several options for re-engagement (see Figure C and the text box). For example, a student re-engaging in February may take one credit recovery course at the REC to make up a failed history class and take two online courses to earn additional credits before re-enrolling in an alternative education high school the following September. These options are not adequate strategies for re-engaging youth; rather, they are solutions the REC staff have developed or amended from existing programs to meet the needs of re-enrolling youth. The REC staff believes such options are critical to engaging out-of-school youth, particularly when capacity in alternative programs remains limited.

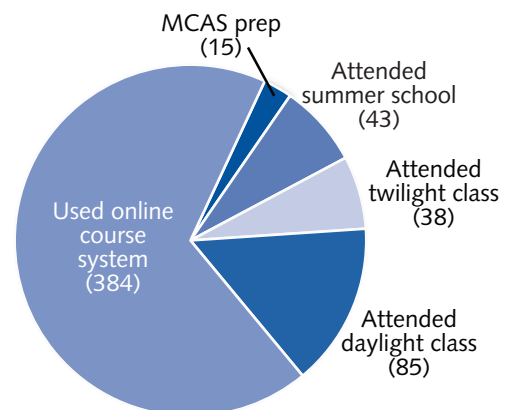
Options the Re-Engagement Center offers to re-enrolling youth

The district offers several non-traditional educational options for “off-track” and re-engaging students. With the establishment of the REC, these options were extended to re-enrolling students so that they can be immediately engaged in the academic process. The REC is not a school, and these options are not alternative education schools. Rather, they comprise a menu of options the REC staff has developed to address the gaps and barriers in the system, allowing students to accelerate their progress by making up credits.

- Twilight School is a night school option where students can take up to two classes on two evenings per week for 15 weeks.
- Summer Review is a summer school option where a student can retake up to two classes five days per week for six weeks.
- Online Credit Recovery is an option for students to both retake courses they have failed and to acquire credit in new content areas. Students can do their work in the REC computer lab, other BPS sites, or at home, though students are required to come in for critical parts of the course.
- REC Recovery Courses offer students the option to retake up to two courses they have previously failed with REC staff teachers, two days per week for 15 weeks.
- MCAS Preparation and Testing is available for students who have yet to pass one or more MCAS test.

Providing a range of options, including some that may be accessed immediately, is essential to keeping re-engaging students interested in continuing their education. Re-engaging an out-of-school youth is a time sensitive matter, and immediate options for re-engaging students were not initially available. After dropout recovery specialists contacted students who had dropped out, many students were interested in re-enrolling right away in May and June. However, they were told to return to school in September and, consequently, lost motivation and did not return. Gail Forbes-Harris describes the shift in thinking: “We hoped to have young people come back in the summer so they could be successful in the beginning of the school year. But that was on our clock, not the students’. Now we see that any time is a good time to come back, and we need to be ready.” The staff

Figure C: Students’ use of REC services and educational options in 2011-12



has come to believe that there is often a very short window of time—less than two weeks—before the student will become unmotivated to re-enroll in school. The REC’s current menu of educational options allows students immediate engagement in *something*, such as online courses or credit recovery courses (see Appendix D for specific examples of options available to re-engaged youth).

The Re-Engagement Center is a driver of reform for serving students at-risk for leaving school. Work to re-engage out-of-school youth has led BPS and its allies to continuously assess best practices for supporting at-risk students, helping to inform district-wide policies on dropout prevention, outreach, and recovery. When a youth re-engages through the REC, staff members probe for specific reasons the student left school. Returning students may cite academic reasons for leaving, such as being too far behind in a course or little overall academic success; other reasons given are non-academic, such as lacking a connection to school, low attendance, and a dearth of support services. Commonly, returning students say they wanted to return to school, but did not know how to re-enroll or feared they would not be successful following reentry. Such feedback, conveyed through the REC, has pushed BPS to re-evaluate support provided to students at-risk for dropping out. For example, the district has recently added indicators to its weighted-student funding formula to provide greater resources to schools working with large numbers of at-risk students, recognizing that effective intervention may require personal attention and a substantial investment of time and money. Further, upon learning about successful re-engagements through the REC, some BPS staff—including high school headmasters and guidance counselors—now refer currently-enrolled students directly to the REC (153 in 2011-12 alone), so they can take advantage of the supportive culture and academic options offered there. These emerging connections provide new opportunities to “off-track” students, while potentially laying the foundation for more robust alternative programming in the district.

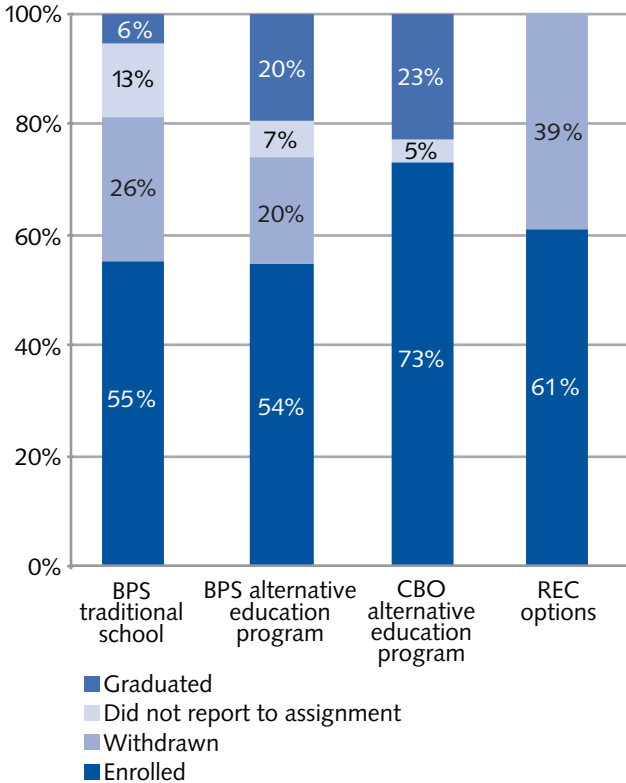
Challenges yet to be addressed

In the three full years since the partners initiated the Re-Engagement Center (REC), the model of dropout recovery in Boston has changed significantly to be more adaptive and responsive to the needs of out-of-school youth. In the process, the work of re-engaging and re-enrolling out-of-school youth has illuminated several ongoing challenges, outlined below.

Information and data tracking is needed to demonstrate the impact of dropout recovery. The dropout rate in Boston has gone down in the years since establishing the REC,²⁹ but neither partner has systematically tracked information to explain the degree to which the REC’s work has contributed to this outcome. Though the REC internally tracks which schools re-enrollees attend and whether they complete their first year of re-enrollment (see Figure D), information is not systematically gathered about what types of out-of-school youth re-enroll or whether they ultimately graduate. REC staff members collect and maintain data for their own purposes and to inform the PIC’s organizational goals; however, data collection, analysis, and program evaluation are needed at the district level to fully understand the REC’s impact. This information should be accessible to district staff and community partners to inform practice. A clearer demonstration of the way in which re-engagement benefits out-of-school youth and leads to improved educational outcomes may help the REC compete for scarce funding.

There is limited capacity in the school district to re-enroll out-of-school youth. Students who drop out leave for multiple reasons, many of which are in response to a prior lack of success in traditional academic environments. As a result, re-engaging youth often prefer to re-enroll in an alternative education program rather than a traditional high school (see Figure D). Older

Figure D: Enrollment status of all students re-engaged through the REC by type of program (2011-12)



students, in particular, may be uncomfortable re-enrolling in a traditional high school alongside 14- and 15-year olds. BPS does offer many alternative education programs, but seats are limited and often fill before the school year begins. Providing a variety of programs to fully accommodate a diverse range of student needs remains a daunting challenge for the district.

More systematic approaches are needed to evaluate out-of-school youth before re-enrollment. While connecting with out-of-school youth on an individual level is a significant emphasis of the REC, re-engagement procedures would benefit from academic, social, and career entry assessments that enhance the work. Generating data and information that can be easily communicated to potential re-enrollment sites will help to smooth transitions of returning students. Developing a clear understanding of students' concerns and needs, which they may struggle to communicate themselves, will help staff match out-of-school youth to appropriate services, such as "readiness training" for those who have been out of school for many months or years.

Formalization of the Re-Engagement Center's work is needed to strengthen organizational capacity and sustainability. Supplies and space are limited, as is REC staff time. A growing case load has burdened current staff members, and more resources are needed to provide adequate service to re-engaging out-of-school youth and district students. Although the REC is sufficiently funded by a large, private foundation grant and BPS, it is clear that the City of Boston, BPS, and the PIC need to bring in additional funding from diverse sources to maintain and expand current operations.

The inflexibility of some state and local policies discourages and disengages many students who are close to graduation. In most BPS schools, the credit system works against those who are disinclined to return to traditional high schools, including those who are older but far from graduating, pregnant or parenting teens, and students who need to work to support their families. Partial credit for incomplete courses is not given, and students report being discouraged when they have to retake courses they have already partially completed or failed. Further, the MCAS is offered only in November and May; many REC students finish their coursework at another point in the year and do not return to take the MCAS. Without this requirement completed, they do not graduate from high school with a diploma. Superintendent Johnson recognizes these deterrents: "We have to more carefully design the alternative structures and programs needed to help these students...they've already experienced failure, and they don't want to repeat that failure."

Considerations

The experiences of those involved in the development, operation, funding, and oversight of the Re-Engagement Center provide key insights for other districts or schools looking to prevent students from dropping out and to bring out-of-school youth back to school.

For school and district leaders

Plan for the re-enrollment of out-of-school youth, and shape re-engagement around their needs by including multiple, flexible re-enrollment options. Connecting with out-of-school youth is uncharted territory for most school districts. To begin, involve all stakeholders within the district (principals, teachers, and support staff) and in the community (parents, students, out-of-school youth, and support agencies) to determine what is needed for returning youth to be successful. Districts should recognize that out-of-school youth may not be comfortable returning to the environment from which they left, and planning for their re-enrollment may require non-traditional educational options. Shape a re-engagement program by defining key components, intended outcomes, indicators of progress, and building on lessons learned from existing re-engagement programs. Elements of successful programs include: individualized and flexible academic programs; a focus on students' future after high school by linking school and career options; strong student support through case management and community organizations; and sufficient autonomy from the district structure to allow for innovation.

Develop partnerships with experienced organizations working to support at-risk youth. One of the findings of our study is that the public-private partnership between a large school district and a youth-serving community organization succeeds in building capacity and driving change through co-ownership of the re-engagement effort. Schools and districts are not designed to service out-of-school youth and may benefit from a collaborative partnership with an external agency that has specialized knowledge of and experience with this population. Working with out-of-school youth often requires a holistic approach that relies on a constellation of local or regional partners and community organizations; a good partner should bring

knowledge of youth development and career exploration, and help enhance the district's work through initiatives such as internships with local businesses or connections to post-secondary education. Encourage both the district and partner to co-own the work through a commitment from all, shared responsibility, and a willingness to use existing community resources to extend the work.

Create a supportive and welcoming environment for returning youth by finding the right staff and location. Re-engagement programs benefit from fostering a sense of community in a location that is easy-to-access by the youth it serves. Cultivating an open-door policy—one that includes open-entry or -exit for students to re-engage throughout the calendar year—is critical to connecting with a student who is unsure about re-enrolling. In a central location, those working directly with out-of-school youth can embrace a youth development model and focus on building students' assets. Using personal experience, skilled and compassionate staff can connect with youth and make them feel comfortable with their decision to re-enroll in school. In building trust with returning youth, they will serve as better advocates for them.

Nurture open communication between re-engagement staff and district leadership to shape systematic change. Building continual, honest communication between the school district and re-engagement program allows for ongoing improvement in both organizations. One of the findings of this study is that Boston Public Schools' leadership has supported re-engagement efforts by using lessons learned from the work to inform district policies. There is the potential for a culture clash between school leadership and those re-engaging youth; creating a space for collaboration and reciprocal feedback allows both parties to prioritize students' needs. Using data and internal evaluation to inform these conversations will hold both parties accountable and allow for deeper conversation about what works and does not work. In identifying strategies that succeed in re-engaging out-of-school youth, the district will be able to better service current students who are at-risk for leaving school and develop alternative pathways to graduation.

For community partners

Use an existing understanding of out-of-school youth to partner with school districts to address unmet needs. Public schools and districts are not designed to recognize or address the myriad non-academic needs that accompany many out-of-school youth. Youth-serving agencies in the community are often more aware and better equipped to serve these needs. Community partners have the capacity to conduct outreach to out-of-school youth, provide services that create a clear link between academics and post-secondary career or educational options, and use their independence and advocacy to generate transformation within the structure of a school district. However, as the Boston re-engagement work revealed, community partners' access to district resources, an essential element to re-enrolling out-of-school youth, may be limited without a strong district partnership. Successfully re-enrolling students may depend on working with the institution principally responsible for students' education.

Address financial stability at the outset to ensure maintenance of the program. One of the findings of this study is that external partners and funders provide additional financial resources to the district specifically for re-engaging out-of-school youth. Developing a program based on needs—like a re-engagement program—rather than on proven outcomes allows for experimentation. Community partners, including those who provide funding for re-engagement work, must acknowledge that research in this field is minimal and be willing to innovate. They may reach out to other organizations to create a learning network to both inform and increase collaboration. To responsibly maintain funding for a re-engagement program, community partners and funders can build rigorous and continual data analysis into the structure of the re-engagement program to inform practice. Doing so may invite additional funding and a more diversified funding strategy.

For state policymakers

Support school districts in making re-engaging out-of-school youth a priority. The Commonwealth's dropout reduction strategies currently support dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts, yet few schools and districts are re-engaging out-of-school youth through recovery. Without including out-of-school youth in targeted programs, educators are not fulfilling their obligation to serve all students. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) has a role to play in encouraging and supporting school districts to serve all students. Additionally, ESE may gather and analyze data from dropout recovery efforts—including the per-pupil cost of re-engagement, stick rate, and graduation rate of re-enrolled students—to inform and transform ongoing statewide reduction and prevention efforts.

Encourage districts to develop new or expand existing education options based on student needs. Students who leave school before graduation do so for a variety of reasons, many of which are not academic. Using flexible programs that complement or take the place of the traditional classroom structure may best serve students who have not previously succeeded in school. To prevent a cycle of failure and adequately serve re-engaging youth, ESE can encourage districts to design and implement alternative education programs. Encouraging districts to define and use multiple pathways for re-enrolling youth in school allows them to provide flexibility around the needs of returning youth. Multiple options may include credit recovery, evening and summer courses, online learning, competency-based credits (rather than seat time), work-based credit, and multiple graduations per calendar year.

Create opportunities for out-of-school youth to graduate by being attentive to their needs. This study revealed that some out-of-school youth who re-enroll in school are able to finish their coursework in time for graduation, but do not ultimately graduate because of inflexible statewide MCAS administration dates. Many re-engaged youth need consistent engagement options to succeed; it is difficult to retain these students when they have finished all academic credits, but must return to school 3-6 months later to take the MCAS. The state may consider investing in district supports to keep students engaged in their education beyond the accumulation of academic credits until MCAS administration dates. Providing greater flexibility in administering the MCAS will help non-traditional students take the test at multiple times throughout the calendar year, allowing them to graduate high school with a diploma.

Conclusion

The information presented in this policy brief summarizes promising practices and ongoing challenges encountered in one large, urban dropout recovery program. Others who are eager to connect with out-of-school youth as a dropout reduction strategy can use these lessons learned to shape re-engagement efforts in their community. The experience of dropout recovery in other districts or schools may be quite different, of course. Practices that have worked in Boston may not be seamlessly applied elsewhere, and it is important to tailor dropout re-engagement and recovery strategies to local community needs. Regardless, dropout recovery efforts provide an opportunity for educators to serve all students, including those who are at-risk for dropping out or leave school before graduating. Kathy Hamilton, the PIC's Youth Transitions Director, stresses, "It's amazing to see how many young people want to come back to school after dropping out—this is what we are leaving on the table if we don't do this work. These young people have not given up on their education, which is a huge asset for them and for the rest of us."

Appendix A: Dropout reduction activities in Massachusetts

Both the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) and the Massachusetts State Legislature have been active in reducing the dropout rate. Below, dropout reduction programs and initiatives directed by ESE are highlighted, followed by recent legislative action aimed at reducing the dropout rate.

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education³⁰

MassGrad (High School Graduation Initiative)

In fall 2010, the U.S. Department of Education selected Massachusetts as just one of two states for the federal High School Graduation Initiative award. The Massachusetts grant project (MassGrad) focuses on the 133 high schools throughout the Commonwealth that exceeded the statewide annual dropout rate of 2.9 percent in the 2008-09 school year.

MassGrad Key Activities:

- Dropout Prevention & Recovery Work Group
- MassGrad Implementation and Planning Awards
- MassGrad Coalition Challenge Awards
- MassGrad Gateway to College Start-Up Awards
- MassGrad Leadership Council

College & Career Readiness and Learning Support Services Units

There are no state funds currently available for general dropout reduction use, however, DESE's College & Career Readiness and Learning Support Services Units coordinate a number of grant programs that support student engagement and success.

Early Warning Indicator System

Massachusetts currently has in place an Early Warning Indicator Index (EWII) for grade 9 students that indicates their risk levels for not graduating on time. The Department is also developing an Early Warning Indicator System (EWIS) to identify students *kindergarten through high school* that are potentially «off-track» for grade-level or developmental age.

Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission

In August 2008 the Massachusetts State Legislature passed An Act to Improve Dropout Prevention and Reporting of Graduation Rates, which established a Commission to make recommendation on 10 topic areas. The Commission report, *Making the Connection*, provides findings and recommendations in four main areas: 1) new statewide expectations; 2) early identification; 3) effective prevention, interventions, and recovery; and 4) responsive reforms and budget priorities.³¹

Strengthening the Field of Alternative Education

DESE is working to enhance the field of Alternative Education across the Commonwealth through annual trainings, including regional networking events and state conferences. In the 2007-08 school year, the Department added an Alternative Education data element to Student Information Management System (SIMS) to increase knowledge about Alternative Education in Massachusetts through new methods. DESE will also use these data to increase targeted technical assistance and to promote and replicate promising practices in the Commonwealth.

Online Courses and Modules for At-Risk Students

The overarching purpose of this project was to contribute to a statewide system of online learning options for all students. Grantees worked collaboratively with DESE to create over 100 high school-level courses and modules for underserved high school students in alternative education, credit recovery, or credit acceleration programs. The Department intends to share these courses and modules free-of-cost with other districts in the Commonwealth.

Legislative action

Two bills were passed by Massachusetts Legislature during the 2011-12 legislative session related to dropout reduction: *An Act relative to student access to educational services and exclusion from school* (Chapter 222 of the Acts of 2012)³² and *An Act regarding families and children engaged in services* (Chapter 240 of the Acts of 2012).³³ Some language in these two bills focuses on dropout reduction activities, including:

- parental notification of consecutive school absences;
- exit interviews for students planning to leave school permanently, including discussion of alternative education options;
- requirements for school districts to provide suspended students with the opportunity to make academic progress during the period of suspension; and
- requirements for school districts to provide expelled students availability to educational services that are designed to lead to re-entry into a regular education program or high school diploma.

Appendix B: Brockton Public Schools' Diploma Pathways

The table below offers an overview of the multiple pathways to a high school diploma in the Brockton Public Schools in Brockton, MA.³⁴

Pathway	Population Served	Entrance Criteria	Exit Criteria
B.B. Russell Alternative School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grades 7-12 Conduct disorder/social maladjustment (not emotionally impaired) Charged with felony complaints or adjudicated delinquent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Due process hearing Modifications/accommodations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HS diploma Return to a mainstream school Transition to another alternative or community-based program Community college dual enroll
Champion High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dropped out or at-risk for dropping out (ages 14-21) Over-age/under-credited youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School of choice Application process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HS diploma Transition to another alternative or community-based program (including 2- and 4-year colleges)
Gateway to College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dropped out or at-risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Application process Entrance testing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HS diploma Transfer to Massasoit Community College
Gateway Prep Academy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High school students seeking entry to Gateway to College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ACCUPLACER results indicative of need for remedial/college preparatory work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrance to Gateway to College Return to Pathways Center for individualized re-engagement plan
Counseling Intervention Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Middle & high school students suspended for 10 days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suspended for weapons/drug violations, or serious behavioral infractions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation in workshops offered by community agencies
Virtual Learning Lab @ Keith Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under-credited, at-risk students Dropped out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At-risk students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Achievement of targeted credits
Pathways Center KEY (Keep Educating Yourself) Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over-age/under-credited youth Disengaged, at-risk youth Dropped out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Desire to re-engage in educational programming Completion of Pathways Referral Packet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual Learning Plan Community GED options Community college coursework Virtual learning Career awareness & exploration
Goddard Alternative School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elementary through high school students with documented emotional disability Licensed day-school placement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Placement by a team through the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HS Diploma Placement by an IEP team into a less/more restrictive setting
Project REACH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eligible Goddard Alternative School students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acceptance by Southeastern Regional Voc Tech High School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HS Diploma
Freshman Academy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incoming grade 9 Brockton High School students in need of a smaller, more intensive instructional environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <19 absent or <11 tardy days MCAS scores 216—230 Failing 2 major academic areas or "D" in all major subjects No major disciplinary issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion of freshman year Remain at Brockton HS
Afternoon Academy (associated with Night School)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over-age/under-credited ELL students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recommendation of district staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HS Diploma Transfer to other educational program
Night School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not enrolled in HS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fee-based; student pays cost 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HS Diploma
Edison Academy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over-age/under-credited youth Dropped out or at-risk Would benefit from non-traditional class schedule 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recommendation of BPS staff Application for re-engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HS Diploma

Appendix C: Study participants

Re-Engagement Center staff

- Gail Forbes Harris, Director, Re-Engagement Center
- Emmanuel Allen, Dropout Recovery Specialist
- Carolina Leon, Dropout Recovery Specialist
- Marvin Moore, Dropout Recovery Specialist
- Wilson Santos, Student Support Coordinator
- Dominic Vozzella, Academic Support Specialist
- John Allocca, Academic Support Specialist

District leaders

- Dr. Carol Johnson, Superintendent
- Dr. Philip Jackson, former Director, Alternative/Adult/GED/Discipline
- Dr. Linda Cabral, Assistant Superintendent, High Schools
- Ferdinand Fuentes, Executive Director, Educational Options
- Alfreda Harris, Boston School Committee Member
- John Barros, Boston School Committee Member

Partners

- Kathy Hamilton, Director Youth Transitions, Boston Private Industry Council
- Neil Sullivan, Executive Director, Boston Private Industry Council
- Tammy Tai, Hyams Foundation
- Rahn Dorsey, Barr Foundation
- Klare Shaw, formerly of Barr Foundation

Headmasters at receiving schools

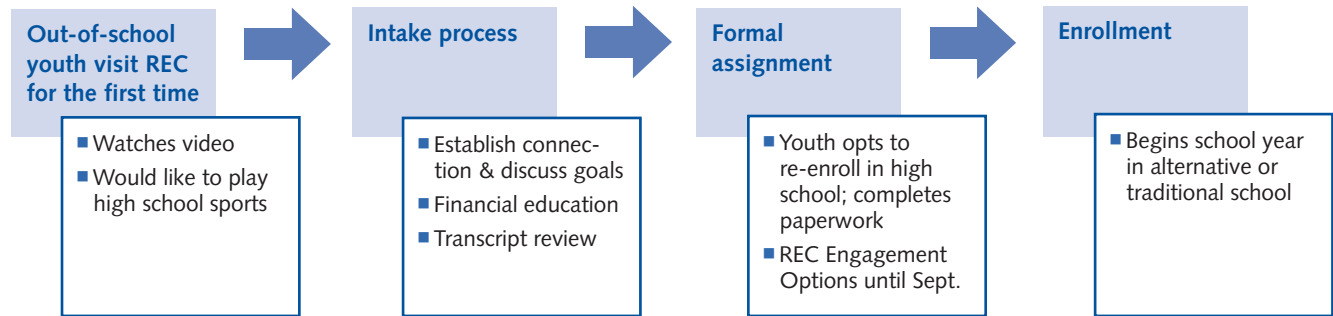
- Julie Coles, Headmaster, Greater Egleston High School
- Sheila Azores, Headmaster, Boston Adult Technical Academy
- Charles McAfee, Headmaster, Madison Park High School

Legislators

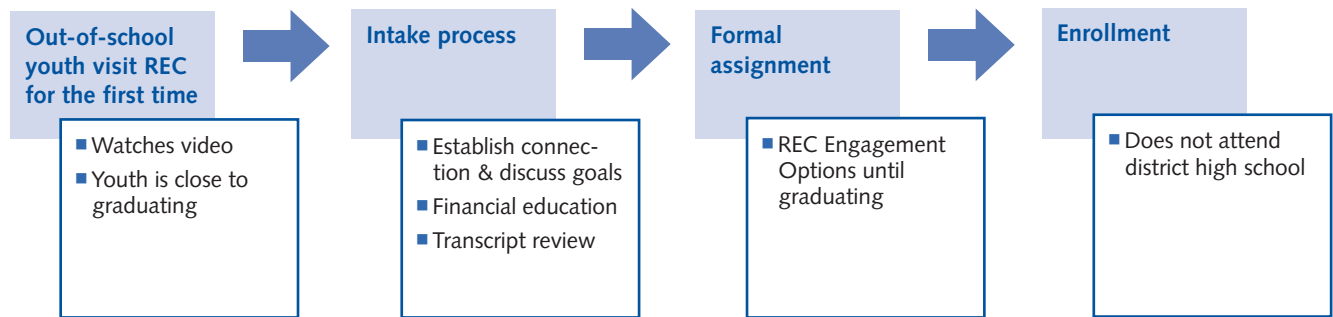
- Massachusetts State Senator Sonia Chang-Díaz
- Massachusetts State Representative Martha Walz

Appendix D: Possible re-engagement options in Boston Public Schools

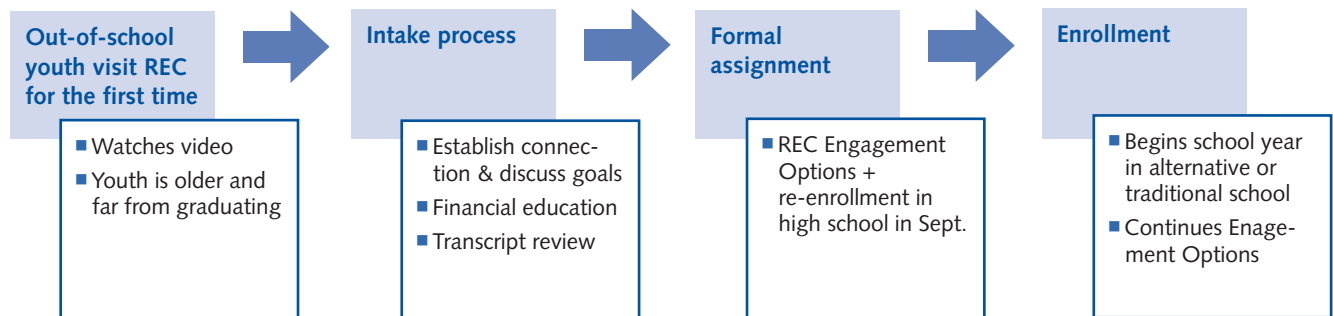
Option 1: Student opts to re-enroll in a district high school



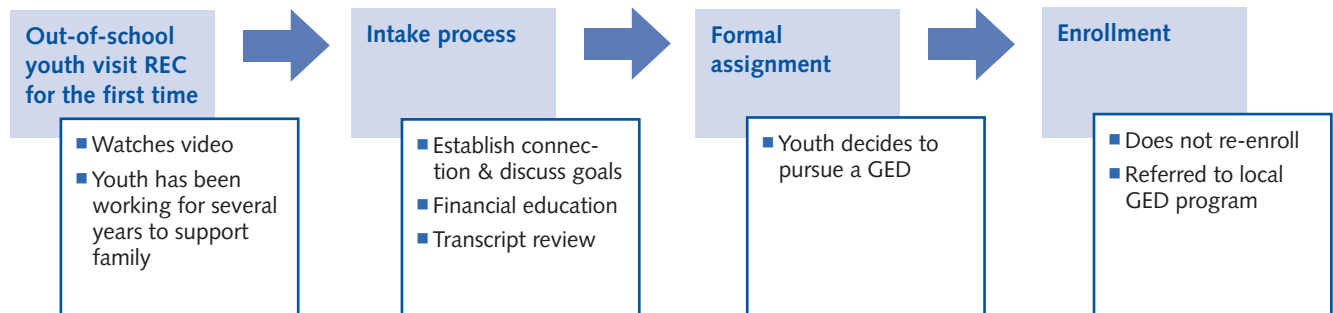
Option 2: Student opts to re-enroll through REC Engagement Options only



Option 3: Student uses a variety of re-enrollment options



Option 4: Student pursues a GED



Endnotes

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In an effort to promote public discourse on educational improvement and to inform policy discussions, the Rennie Center periodically publishes policy briefs, which are broadly disseminated to policymakers and stakeholders in the public, private, nonprofit and media sectors. Policy briefs contain independent research on issues of critical importance to the improvement of public education. Briefs are designed to present policymakers and opinion leaders with just-in-time information to help guide and inform their decisions on key educational issues.

About the RENNIE CENTER

The Rennie Center's mission is to develop a public agenda that informs and promotes significant improvement of public education in Massachusetts. Our work is motivated by a vision of an education system that creates the opportunity to educate every child to be successful in life, citizenship, employment and life-long learning. Applying nonpartisan, independent research, journalism, and civic engagement, the Rennie Center is creating a civil space to foster thoughtful public discourse to inform and shape effective policy. For more information, please visit www.renniecenter.org.

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