

# THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

POLICY BRIEF ■ SUMMER 2013

## STATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RECONNECTING YOUNG ADULTS TO EDUCATION, SKILLS TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

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### THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

#### Strengthening State Policies for America's Working Poor

Millions of American breadwinners work hard to support their families. But, despite their determination and effort, many are mired in low-wage jobs that provide inadequate benefits and offer few opportunities for advancement. In fact, nearly one in three American working families now earn wages so low that they have difficulty surviving financially.<sup>2</sup>

Launched in 2002 and currently supported by The Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce, and Kresge foundations, the Working Poor Families Project is a national initiative that works to improve these economic conditions. The project partners with state non-profit organizations and supports their state policy efforts to better prepare America's working families for a more secure economic future.

For more information:  
[www.workingpoorfamilies.org](http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org)

### INTRODUCTION

For most young Americans, the path to a secure economic future begins early in life with positive family, social and educational experiences that typically result in a high school diploma and a clear plan for pursuing postsecondary education or other job skill training. However, an alarmingly large number of young adults have disconnected from traditional education or skills training pathways, often without obtaining a basic high school credential. The research is clear: the longer a person is without a high school credential or without the skill training necessary for a family-sustaining wage, the more likely that individual will remain in poverty and be a significant consumer of public welfare and social services.<sup>3</sup>

The *Kids Count Policy Report on Young Adults and Work*, released in 2012 by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, took a close look at “disconnected young adults” who lack high school diplomas and would greatly benefit from increased educational and job opportunity.<sup>4</sup> The report notes that many young adults have had challenges that were beyond their control such as a childhood spent in poverty, living with a single, poorly educated parent, attending low-performing schools and/or lacking positive role models. Further, young people often lack support for transitioning from high school or the GED®<sup>5</sup> to college and often are discouraged at the prospect of taking multiple remedial courses at postsecondary institutions.

This policy brief focuses on information, policies and strategies for reconnecting young adults (typically 18-24 years-old) to education and skill training opportunities, with a specific emphasis on state level policies and interventions. This is an important area for the state non-profit organizations that partner with the Working Poor Families Project (WFPF), a national initiative to strengthen state policies that influence the well-being of low-income working families. By directing more attention to this issue, WFPF and its state partners have the opportunity to promote state policies that can assist disconnected young adults to gain the education and skills necessary to effectively support themselves and their families.

## DESCRIBING THE ISSUE

According to the 2011 American Community Survey, the 18-24 year old segment of the population was just over 31 million, about 10% of the total U.S. population. Of this age group, 64% are White, 18% Hispanic, 14% Black and 2% Asian. The minority population within this age group has been increasing at a faster rate than the white population due to the combined effect of higher birth rates and immigration.<sup>6</sup>

Although the nation's public school graduation rate has increased eight percentage points—to 74.7%—in the last decade, estimates of the actual numbers of 18-24 year-olds who lack a high school credential range from five to six million individuals.<sup>7</sup> Dropout rates for minority students are more than double that of whites. Students from low-income families (defined as 200% of the federal poverty level) dropped out of high school at six times the rate of their peers from higher-income families.<sup>8</sup> Research shows that only about one-quarter of those who fail to graduate with their peers eventually receive diplomas; another one-quarter will eventually complete the GED® and receive a high school equivalent credential. However, an alarming one-half never attain a high school credential.<sup>9</sup>

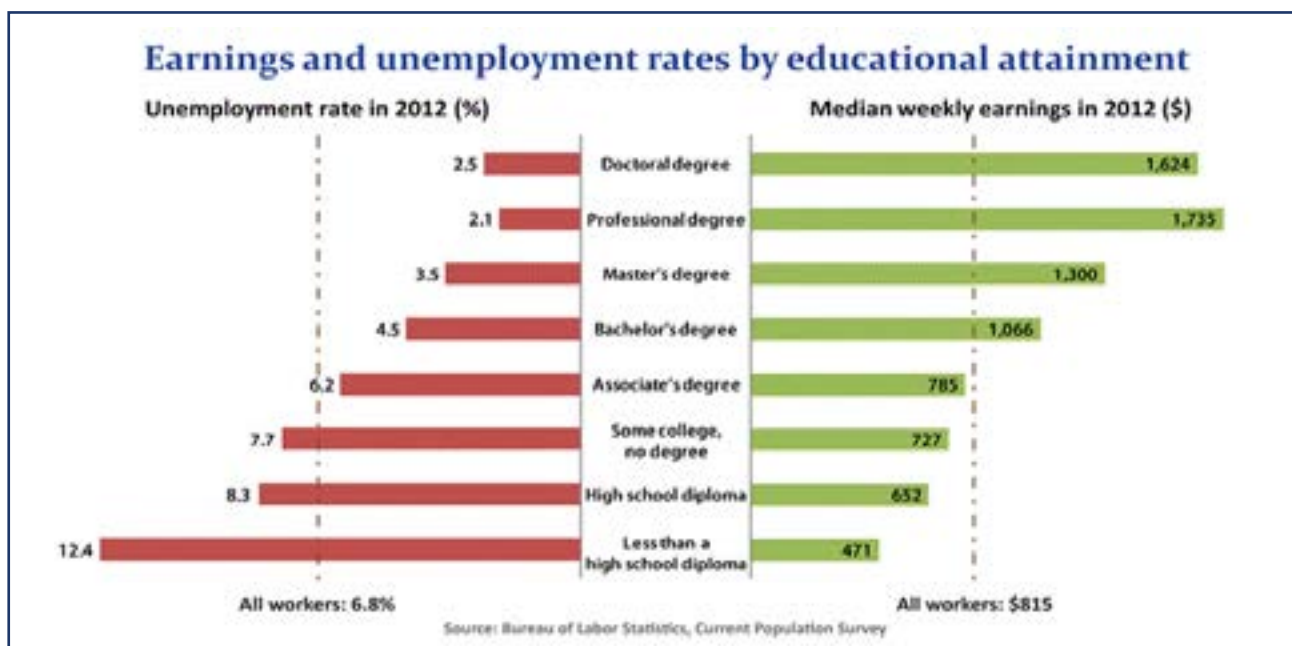
In 2010, more than 500,000 adults completed the GED®, and 72% of them received their high school

equivalency credential. Although the average age of the GED® examinee is 26, just over one-third of all examinees are between 18-24 years-old.<sup>10</sup> Forthcoming changes to the GED® test content and its administration in 2014 have raised concern that the new GED® will be even more challenging and difficult to pass.<sup>11</sup>

When young people fail to obtain a high school diploma and other educational credentials, they—and American society at large—face multiple negative consequences. As the table below indicates, low educational attainment significantly impacts earning power as well as increasing the incidence of unemployment.<sup>12</sup>

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, not attaining a high school diploma or its equivalent results not only in problems and issues for the individual, but in significant costs to society at large:

- Compared to an individual without a high school diploma, a high school graduate yields a public benefit of over \$200,000 more in lower government spending and higher tax revenues. If the number of individuals without high school diplomas were cut in half, the government would likely see a total of \$45 billion in savings and additional revenue.



- Three-quarters of state prison inmates are without a high school diploma or equivalent. If the male graduation rate were increased by only five percent, the nation would see an annual savings of \$4.9 billion in crime-related costs.
- Cutting the dropout rate nationally for a single high school class in half would likely support as many as 54,000 new jobs and would likely increase the gross domestic product by as much as \$9.6 billion.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, helping out-of-school young adults to reconnect to educational opportunities leading to a high school diploma or its equivalency is an important state policy goal. However, reaching that point is insufficient. Young adults will increasingly need further education and skills if they are to become economically self-sufficient and capable of supporting a family.

A landmark five-year study by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, known commonly as the “Tipping Point” research, looked at adults with basic skills below the high school level who enrolled in college non-credit basic skills and ESL courses. Its purpose was to determine patterns of success with regard to for-credit educational program completion and later employment.<sup>14</sup>

A major finding was that in order to have a reasonable chance for both types of success, a student needed to have considerable support and assistance, and to persist in at least one year of college credit programming. Without these two criteria, a person was very likely to end up in a low paying job and still not have high-school level basic skills. The significance of this report cannot be understated with regard to the concepts of comprehensively reconnecting young adults to opportunities for more advanced education and employment.

The public policy organization Demos examined Bureau of Labor Statistics data for young adults in 2012 in order to see how the experience of young people today affects their prospects for tomorrow. They found that the year passed with no significant gains for young people, who continue to endure a jobs crisis even as the economy begins to recover. The latest numbers from 2013 reveal no significant change in the trend. The Demos report asserts that the development of state-level public policy and

Without policy targeted to the needs of young adults, the nation risks an entire generation marked by the insecurities of the Great Recession for the rest of their working lives.

investments to directly employ young adults—especially young adults of color and those without a college degree—could have multiple benefits including adding job readiness and marketable skills to the workforce, developing individuals’ work history and increasing economic resources in the community. Without policy targeted to the needs of young adults, the nation risks an entire generation marked by the insecurities of the Great Recession for the rest of their working lives.<sup>15</sup>

### **STATE LEVERAGING/COORDINATION OF RELEVANT FEDERALLY FUNDED PROGRAMS**

A number of federally authorized programs exist that directly impact the reconnection of young adults to education and training. Many of these programs are administered by state governments and typically have not only a matching fund requirement for the participating state, but require or encourage states to coordinate state policy efforts to maximize the federal and state resources.<sup>16</sup> Examples of the largest (in terms of funds allocated) federal programs offering significant coordination potential include:

**Adult Basic Education (ABE)** – The nation’s largest ongoing effort to assist adults of all ages to attain a high school diploma or credential is the national adult basic education system funded federally through Title II of the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Although this system provides over \$500 million in federal funds per year and an estimated \$300 million in leveraged state resources, the system annually serves only about 4%-7% of the estimated eligible population of adults 16 and over who are not enrolled in high school and are lacking a high school diploma or English proficiency.

States typically have legislation and policy that supports the federal requirements and strengthens programming and accountability. States have some limited flexibility with federal ABE funds to prioritize services, and federal initiatives currently promote a greater level of coordination with postsecondary adult career pathway efforts.

**WIA Title IB Youth Program** – The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Title IB Youth Program provides services to young adults ages 14-21. The main thrust of this program is to increase the focus on longer-term academic and occupational learning opportunities and develop long-term comprehensive strategies. Services are provided to in-school students aged 14-21 and out-of-school participants aged 16-21. About \$800 million was distributed to states for 2012 services. Every state is required to have a Youth Council as a subgroup of the state Workforce Investment Board. The Council role includes policy and investment recommendations.

**Perkins** – The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act, last reauthorized in 2006, focuses on the academic achievement of career, vocational and technical education students, strengthens the connections between secondary and postsecondary education, and improves state and local accountability. Perkins funding serves both high school students and postsecondary students, and features career pathway programming around a nationally established set of major career and occupational clusters. Although the use of Perkins funds for remedial programming, like GED® attainment and postsecondary developmental education, is not allowable under Perkins rules, the coordination with remedial programming options is encouraged.

**Job Corps** – Through a nationwide network of campuses, Job Corps offers a comprehensive array of career development services to at-risk young women and men, ages 16 to 24, to prepare them for successful careers. Job Corps employs a holistic career development training approach that integrates the teaching of academic, vocational and employability skills and social competencies through a combination of classroom, practical and experience-based learning to prepare young adults for stable, long-term, high-paying jobs.

**Prisoner Reentry Initiative** – Under this initiative, local groups can become eligible to receive grants to provide young adult offenders, or children who are at risk of becoming incarcerated or dropping out-of-school, with employment and educational

opportunities. Applicants for this grant include schools, juvenile justice agencies and nonprofit community organizations. The goal of the initiative is to prevent teenagers from dropping out-of-school, increase employment for out-of-school young adults, increase their educational skills and decrease their involvement in violence and crime.

**Youth Build** – In Youth Build programs, low-income young people ages 16 to 24 work full-time for six to 24 months toward high school diplomas or credentials, while learning job skills by building affordable housing in their communities. Emphasis is placed on leadership development, community service and the creation of a positive mini-community of adults and young adults committed to each other's success. At exit, they are placed in college, jobs or both.

## **POSSIBLE STATE TOOLS FOR RECONNECTING YOUNG ADULTS TO EDUCATION AND SKILLS TRAINING**

Given the scope and importance of the young adult reconnection problem facing the nation, states have the motivation to take a variety of actions to address this issue. Although states have started giving more attention to the dropout issue, much of the attention is focused on prevention rather than recovering or reconnecting with out-of-school young adults; as a result, there are only a few examples of state actions in this area.<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that the reconnection issue is difficult for states for a number of reasons including:

- Lack of rigorous and connected data systems and tracking mechanisms to provide hard data for indentifying out-of-school young adults to inform policy decision making.
- Difficulty aligning a confusing array of existing efforts, policies and players that focus on common goals but have widely varying objectives, strategies and accountability requirements.
- Lack of support for reworking existing state funding streams, especially without additional resources.<sup>18</sup>

However, some states have examined this important problem and even initiated strategies to tackle it. States are taking four primary approaches: (1) elevating state attention to the issue of disconnected young adults; (2) engaging young adults to achieve educational outcomes;



(3) leveraging Adult Basic Education and high school equivalency options; and (4) introducing and preparing young adults for work. Each of these areas is examined below.

### 1) Elevating State Attention to the Issue of Disconnected Young Adults

For states that choose to focus on the problem of unemployed, undereducated and/or unskilled young adults, there are at least three established channels.

**P-20 Initiatives** – Almost every state has embraced the P-20 education reform movement that attempts to align and make more seamless the separately functioning systems of education from preschool through college. The Education Commission of the States (ECS) maintains a website that describes the structure and content focus of P-20 Councils for each state.<sup>19</sup> In some states, these councils are not only interested in improving the transition of traditional K-12 students into college; they are seeking transition solutions for out-of-school young adults as well. For example, the most recent report of the **Illinois** P-20 Council articulates a specific goal to “Reengage students who have dropped out to enable them to complete a high school diploma or the GED®, or a degree or certificate.”<sup>20</sup>

**WIA Youth Councils** – The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) requires all states to have a Youth Council as a subgroup of the state Workforce Investment Board (WIB). Membership of the Youth Council typically includes individuals from business, education, community-based organizations and public agencies; and representatives of young adult service agencies, including juvenile justice and local law enforcement agencies, local public housing authorities; parents of eligible young adults seeking assistance under WIA; and individuals and representatives of organizations that have experience relating to young adult activities. Youth Councils are required to develop and implement a comprehensive plan for youth services related to education and employment and they often recommend state policy changes or new state policies for legislative consideration.<sup>21</sup>

**Data Systems Reforms** – Although large urban school districts have led the way for collecting and analyzing data on high school dropouts and disconnected young adults, a national effort known as the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) Grant Program is assisting states to

efficiently manage, analyze and use education data, including individual student records. As it evolves, the SLDS should help states, districts, schools, educators and other stakeholders to make data-informed decisions to improve student learning and outcomes, both for traditional learners and for young adults who are in need of a reconnection opportunity.<sup>22</sup> For example, **Maryland** implemented StudentStat, a performance measurement and management process whereby top policymakers, including the governor, review education data (e.g., cohort graduation rate and dropout rate) on a quarterly basis to track progress on goals and shape future policy decisions.<sup>23</sup>

### 2) Engaging Young Adults to Achieve Educational Outcomes

To date, states have played a modest role in seeking to promote and support local efforts to enhance the educational outcomes of disconnected young adults. However, there are opportunities for leadership and action.

**Recovery Initiatives** – Significant local attention is given to connecting at-risk youth and out-of-school young adults to a variety of educational opportunities. These efforts are typically driven by school districts, especially urban ones, and involve efforts to locate and encourage out-of-school young adults to return to school or to alternative venues such as adult education centers, community-based non-profit training programs and even community colleges. Some states have sought to establish policies or incentives for this to happen on a statewide scale.

As an example, Texas developed policy and made considerable investments through a program called The **Texas** Dropout Recovery Program (TDRP). Initiated in 2008, the program invested millions annually in local organizations (i.e., school districts, charter schools, non-profits, higher education institutions) to connect out-of-school young adults to education opportunities so they could achieve their high school equivalency or gain college readiness skills. Over four years, \$21 million dollars was spent on the program, serving over 8,000 dropouts.

The Texas state legislature did not continue funding in 2012, despite a strong evaluation with positive outcome data that noted the program made a meaningful impact on the lives of its graduates and filled an important gap in **Texas** educational

A 2011 National Governors' Association report called for reforming state budgeting processes to support local efforts to address disconnected young adults.

services for students who have dropped out of school. Evaluation estimates suggest that TDRP would save the state \$95 million in current dollars.<sup>24</sup>

Two years ago, following state legislation, the **Washington** Office of State Public Instruction (OSPI) established the Open Doors Young Adults Reengagement initiative. The program allows local school districts to enter into inter-local agreements with qualifying organizations—community colleges, educational service districts, community-based organization and others—to provide dropout reengagement services for out-of-school students not expected to graduate by age 21. The initiative also allows OSPI to provide basic education funding directly to community colleges undertaking recovery programs in agreement with a local school district.

Open Door programs must offer the following: (1) academic instruction, including GED preparation, academic skills, and college and work readiness preparation, that generates high school credit towards a diploma and has the goal of academic and work readiness; (2) instruction by certified teachers or college instructors whose credentials are established by a college; (3) case management, counseling, and resource and referral services; and (4) opportunity for qualified students to enroll in college courses tuition-free, if the program provider is a college. Programs are approved by OSPI. Open Door programs are expected to generate attention and development across the state, especially at community colleges, for two reasons: (1) state basic education resources are available to support Open Door programs; and (2) students served via direct community college programs are not included in high school graduation calculations.

Other states, such as **Illinois** and **Massachusetts**, called for state programs for dropout recovery, but have not appropriated funds for implementation. The Illinois Hope and Opportunities through Education program was adopted by the state legislature and identified as a promising strategy in the state's first P-20 council report, but was never funded.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, a Massachusetts's 2009 special government commission report on dropout prevention and recovery called for state action to support local recovery initiatives;<sup>26</sup> however, state action and funding on recovery initiatives have received minimal support.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, difficult state budget times have negatively impacted efforts to get these state efforts underway and to sustain them. A 2011 National Governors' Association (NGA) report called for reforming state budgeting processes to support local efforts to address disconnected young adults.<sup>28</sup> Such reforms would entail providing weighted resource allocation formulas to reward areas that serve at-risk, out-of-school young adults and to raise the age level of K-12 support to encompass older young adults (i.e., above 21) who are out-of-school and still in need of a high school equivalency. In 2007, **Texas** raised the limit of public education services to age 26. Only eight states do not set an upper statutory student age for public education.<sup>29</sup>

**Alternative Educational Models** – Many large school districts have developed alternative high schools that serve students who struggle in the traditional K-12 setting. Alternative schools, sometimes called second-chance schools, are created as separate organizations and are often part of the public elementary/secondary school system. However, in efforts to serve out-of-school young adults, some places have sought to engage specially focused charter schools, community-based organizations and even community colleges.

One strategy that has received some attention is the “early college” concept, engaging community colleges to serve at-risk students. These programs allow students to work toward their high-school degrees while taking college classes and earning college credits, thus positioning them to work toward a postsecondary credential. Such programs are typically done in partnership with local school districts, which contribute funding to cover student costs, but all activities are conducted on the college campus.

Gateway to College is a national “early college”

initiative that operates in 22 states, at 42 colleges.<sup>30</sup> The initiative is somewhat unique among early college efforts in that it operates as a drop-out recovery program focusing specifically on disconnected “out-of-school youth.” The initiative is ten years old and recently has received significant funding from national organizations such as the Kresge and Bill and Melinda Gates foundations to enhance its program and expand into additional colleges.

One current expansion effort is in **Massachusetts** and is being conducted in partnership with the state’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Utilizing a federal grant award rather than state resources, the Department is helping to expand the number of Massachusetts community colleges with a Gateway program. The Department provides start-up funding and intensive technical assistance and training support (provided by the Gateway to College National Network) for three institutions of higher education that partner with at least one eligible school district. Although, as noted earlier, the state did not commit significant state funds to support the recovery recommendations presented in the 2009 report, this partnership with the national Gateway to College initiative is a promising example of what states can do.

In 2012, **Colorado** authorized local education providers and community colleges to enter into agreements to establish dropout recovery programs, allowing students who have dropped out of high school, or are at-risk of dropping out, to complete their high school requirements exclusively at a community college. Participating students who complete the program receive their high school diplomas by taking college-level courses for college credit. They then can re-enroll to work toward a post-secondary certificate or degree. In 2013, follow-up legislation required school districts to pay the student’s tuition for each class in which he or she enrolls, not just those completed. This helps more students stick with the program and ultimately complete it, and encourages more community colleges to participate by assuring tuition costs are covered. To-date, two community colleges in Colorado have established these dropout recovery programs in affiliation with Gateway to College.

### 3) Leveraging Adult Basic Education and High School Equivalencies

As noted earlier, major changes to Adult Basic Education in terms of the GED® will be implemented in 2014. These impending changes have prompted a number of states to examine state policies and undertake actions to create alternatives for achieving a high school degree or equivalency. States understand that the GED® may not be the best equivalency alternative for some of their students, especially those with limited English proficiency and those with exam anxiety or learning disabilities. In 2013, **Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Missouri, Montana, New York and New Hampshire** announced they would be switching to new high school equivalency exams. Officials in **California** also started looking into amending regulations to drop the requirement that the state use the GED® test only. **Texas** plans to make their decision after requesting bids from test makers. Several other states, including **Massachusetts** and **Indiana**, are making plans to formally request information about alternative exams. Those two states, as well as **New Jersey** and **Tennessee**, are also exploring the option of offering more than just one state-endorsed high school equivalency test. **Minnesota** and **Washington** are creating their own high school equivalency process that will feature sets of measureable competencies in basic skills, career awareness and college readiness.

The extent to which these efforts result in actions to specifically recruit and serve disconnected young adults remains to be seen. But certainly moving toward new exams creates the opportunity to bring this target population into the discussions and represent it as a high priority.

Irrespective of the impending change, at least one state has been taking action to leverage Adult Basic Education capacity to support dropout recovery efforts. For the past three years, **Mississippi** has invested \$100,000 annually to each of 15 community colleges to support increased student enrollment, completion of the GED® and overall student success. The funds can be used to support additional instructors, test fees and classroom supplies, as well as financial assistance for students transitioning to postsecondary classes. The Mississippi Economic Policy Center successfully worked with other supporters to preserve \$1.5 million in Drop Out Recovery Funds in 2012 so that colleges can offer wraparound



supports, revised curriculum that embed skills development into ABE/GED courses and staff dedicated to student success and transitions to postsecondary.<sup>31</sup>

This latter idea, also known as a “Bridge” program, is a component of a career pathway framework. Bridge programs are intended to reform the delivery of education to be more relevant to the career aspirations of non-traditional students such as disconnected young adults. Such programs can also help address one obstacle that has recently emerged: changes to the federal Pell grant financial aid program that eliminated assistance to incoming postsecondary students without a high school degree. Bridge and career pathway programs provide the opportunity to obtain a high school equivalency while gaining postsecondary credits for continued advancement.

Career pathways and bridge programs have received national attention through such initiatives as the Joyce Foundation Shifting Gears’ and the Joyce/Gates’ Accelerating Opportunities. These initiatives support seven states in linking their Adult Basic Education and Community College programs into guided and structured educational programs of study. At their best, these programs are structured to combine basic academic work with occupation skills training and provide an educational pathway for students to advance toward postsecondary credentials. They are seen as promising for engaging young adults who previously had little interest in traditional educational programs.

State-level policy and systems change have been encouraged by these initiatives. For example, **Minnesota’s** approach to adult basic education now includes creating pre-bridge classes for lower level ABE students that align directly to a postsecondary adult career pathway program. In **Wisconsin’s** RISE approach, students may receive their high school equivalency by successfully completing their adult career pathway postsecondary course and completing two additional units of instruction.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4) Connecting Young Adults to Employment

Employment of young adults is at a 45-year low. Out-of-school males of color are more likely to be unemployed and live in poverty than their white counterparts. In addition, this population faces a likelihood of increased interactions with the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Research shows that early job experience increases the

Bridge and career pathway programs provide the opportunity to obtain a high school equivalency while gaining postsecondary credits for continued advancement.

likelihood of more work in the future. A continuum of work builds job readiness skills, knowledge and confidence.<sup>33</sup> Providing disconnected young adults with opportunities for apprenticeship programs, subsidized work, job training and/or work-like activities can help young adults get on track toward education and economic success.

**Apprenticeships and Pre-apprenticeships** – State labor and economic development agencies typically manage implementation of state laws or policies governing apprenticeships or internships. In some states, **Ohio** for example, pre-apprenticeships are available and managed by the Ohio State Apprenticeship Council. For Ohio, a pre-apprenticeship program means a program that teaches basic technical and job-readiness skills for a designated occupation or occupational sector, to prepare participants for registered apprenticeship training. Pre-apprenticeships normally features a classroom and/or lab setting, but may also involve work-site visits, job-shadowing, internships or other activities outside the program facility, to provide exposure to the work environment for the targeted occupation(s). One component of Ohio’s program serves out-of-school young adults up to age 21.<sup>34</sup>

**Internships and Subsidized Employment** – Internship opportunities for young adults are commonly available through local young adult service and employment agency sponsors, but state policy to foster internships appear limited only to opportunities within state government agencies.

Subsidized young adult employment programs provide opportunities young adults might not otherwise have, particularly when employment



rates for this age group are at a historic low. States can develop and sustain partnerships that combine the resources and expertise of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grants, workforce agencies and other organizations. For example, **New York** has for several years used TANF block grant funds to subsidize employment opportunities for young adults through local workforce investment agencies. By combining multiple resources, states can expand upon opportunities that began in summer 2010 through the TANF Emergency Fund.<sup>35</sup>

**Work Readiness and Work Credential Programs** – While often not targeted toward disconnected young adults, work readiness credentials can help disconnected young adults overcome employer hesitancy to hire. Most local adult education programs across the nation provide opportunities for students to earn high school credentials including the GED® or a local high school diploma through credit recovery. Some adult education programs and other state supported training institutions are beginning to offer nationally recognized work readiness options such as the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC). For example, the **Kentucky** Department of Workforce Investment and the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce have partnered to offer and promote the NCRC instruction and assessment. The certificates include the signatures of both Kentucky Governor and the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce President. Over 200 career centers and adult education sites in Kentucky deliver NCRC training and assessments.<sup>36</sup>

## ENGAGEMENT OPTIONS

This policy brief has been prepared for **Working Poor Families Project (WFPF)** state partners, and for individuals who are involved in programming and/or policy development leading to the educational and economic betterment of disconnected young adults. A number of examples have been cited of state policy and actions targeted to improve the reconnection of young adults to education and employment. However, much more needs to be accomplished at the state policy and local implementation levels.

The extent of the problem calls for significant activity to occur at the state level in order to give policy priority to the issue and to develop more comprehensive and concentrated strategies that are commensurate with the problem. But unless the political will and commitment to address this

issue becomes a priority for state officials, the chance for significant action and improvement is modest at best. The following recommendations offer strategies and policies for state level engagement:

1. **Become Informed of the Needs** – What are the young adult reconnection needs and issues in your state? The U.S. Census American Community Survey offers educational attainment and demographic characteristics by state. Your state P-20 Council or WIA Youth Council may have a compilation of data and needs information that help them make policy recommendations. Major charitable or state-based philanthropic organizations (e.g. United Way, YMCA) often have young adults-at-risk information that supports their efforts. Annual dropout statistics and reports are available from your state education agency. Find out if your state has a SLDS initiative and share your ideas about missing data or information that would be enlightening and useful. Leverage the potential of data to educate stakeholders, build transparency and manage performance
2. **Connect with the Major Federal Efforts** – The federal programs mentioned in this report exist in almost every state and have activities and policies that impact the reconnection of young adults to education and employment. In particular, the Adult Basic Education, WIA Youth and Perkins agencies often have opportunities to participate in policy councils or forums, and their state websites offer an array of reports that demonstrate needs and ongoing activities and projects. Also, most federally funded agencies that operate at the state level are seeking new ways to collaborate (often a mandate) and bring stakeholders together for a common purpose. Your participation in a collaborative event or forum would be welcomed. You could also host a young adult reconnection forum.
3. **Build Multifaceted Collaborations** – Although the federal programs noted in this report are accomplishing many targeted goals with their mandated constituencies, it is widely acknowledged that these efforts are underfunded and have not succeeded in creating significant state policy change. Reconnecting young adults to education and employment requires a multifaceted approach. No one system or sector can do it alone. In order

to foster the necessary collaborative approach, it is recommended that collaborations be formed or forums be held that genuinely include policy-setting decision makers from K-12, career and technical education, state community and technical colleges, child welfare and juvenile justice systems. In addition, providing the opportunity for at-risk young adults to share their stories and needs is a powerful first step in developing and motivating new collaborations.

#### 4. Pursue a Comprehensive Delivery Model –

Evidence from many reconnection efforts show that recovering disconnected young adults and ensuring that they attain the ultimate goal of family-sustaining employment is dependent on a program delivery model that links basic and postsecondary education, skill training and job experience. While most recovery intervention models contain the first two components, the connection to real work is often missing. Examples of job experience approaches include internships, apprenticeships, mentorships, work-study programs and part-time employment. Connections with ready-to-hire employers for in-demand jobs are essential. Also, the need for a program navigator or advisor that follows the student through the pathway to employment process cannot be understated.

#### 5. Focus on State Policies Reconnecting Young Adults to Education and Skills Training –

The following strategies and policy ideas are supported by information presented in this report about programs and strategies that have demonstrated promise for reconnecting young adults to education and employment:

- Establish state data collection and tracking policies and protocols that facilitate the understanding and scope of the reconnection issue and allow for the linkage of high school data, postsecondary data, social program information and workforce information. Having solid information about disconnected young adults is a first step to support informed policy-making.
- Support dropout recovery efforts by providing funding to find disconnected young adults and re-connect them to education and skills training programs. Successful policies include creating alternative funding to encourage schools, community colleges

and community-based organizations to serve these disconnected young adults and raising the statutory student age limit on public education expenditures.

- Support high quality alternative high schools that include flexible mechanisms and models such as online learning, flexible day policies, linkages to support services and incentives to persist in school.
- Leverage K-12 and adult education resources to encourage student completion of high school equivalencies and connections to postsecondary education through pre-bridge and bridge programs. Assure that the GED® test and alternative diploma options are available at an affordable rate.
- Create a short term (e.g. one year) intensive program that targets disconnected young adults and facilitate a career pathway featuring workforce entry level credentials as an outcome.
- Combine state, WIA and TANF resources to promote subsidized employment, pre-apprenticeships and internships for disconnected young adults.

How do we maintain our standing as a country of opportunity and upward mobility, ensuring that present and future generations of Americans have the tools and skills to succeed? One answer lies in our ability to develop and strengthen pathways for young adults that are critical for reconnection to a quality education and family-sustaining employment. Like the generations before them, our nation's young adults are anxiously awaiting their shot at the American Dream, an opportunity to fulfill their potential. State policy makers and policy advocates must do all they can to facilitate that attainable dream—for our young adults, and for us all.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Barry Shaffer is an educational consultant and the former Minnesota state director of adult education (1998-2012). He has particular experience and expertise in the coordination of adult basic education policy and delivery with postsecondary bridge (transition) programming. The reports cited in the endnotes provided an invaluable wealth of information that contributed significantly to the synthesis of information and conclusions noted in this policy brief. In addition, the author wishes to acknowledge the contributions of Deborah Rabia Povich and Brandon Roberts for their help in synthesizing information and developing the policy recommendations found in this report. Finally, many thanks to report reviewers and commenters for their very helpful edits and comments: Jenny Wittner, Women Employed; Robert Wordlaw, Chicago Jobs Council; Frank Waterous, The Bell Policy Center; Ed Sivak, Mississippi Economic Policy Center; Leslie Helmcamp, Texas Center for Public Policies Priorities; and Nick Mathern, Gateway to College National Network.

<sup>2</sup>The Working Poor Families Project (Winter 2012-2013). Low-Income Working Families: The Growing Economic Gap. Online at: [http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Winter-2012\\_2013-WPFP-Data-Brief.pdf](http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Winter-2012_2013-WPFP-Data-Brief.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2012, March). Young Adults and Work: Restoring Teens and Young adult Connections to Opportunity. Kids Count Policy Report. Online at: <http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/Publications.aspx?pubguid=%7B3213DA55-8216-4065-B408-D7A521CDD990%7D>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census – American Community Survey. (2011). Age, sex and race tables: S0101, B02001.

<sup>7</sup> Young, Kathryn (2011, November). Dropout Recovery is National Recovery. Jobs for the Future Policy report. Online at: <http://www.jff.org/publications/education/dropout-recovery-national-recovery-how-f/1356>.

<sup>8</sup> Martin, N., & Halperin, S. (2006). Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Young Adults. Washington, DC: American Young Adults Policy Forum. Online at: [www.aypf.org/publications/WhateverItTakes/WIT\\_ninseconds.pdf](http://www.aypf.org/publications/WhateverItTakes/WIT_ninseconds.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The GED® Testing Service (2012). The 2012 annual statistical report. Washington, DC. The GED® Testing Service, LLC, and the American Council on Education

<sup>11</sup> Clymer, Carol (Fall 2012). Preparing for the New GED® Test: What to Consider Before 2014. Working Poor Families Project. Online at: [http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/WPFP-fall-brief\\_2012.pdf](http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/WPFP-fall-brief_2012.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Labor (2012). Earnings and employment rates by educational attainment. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

<sup>13</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education (2011, November). The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools. Issue Brief. Online at: [www.all4ed.org/files/HighCost.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/HighCost.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (2005). Building Pathways to Success for Low-Skill Adult Students: Lessons for Community College Policy and Practice from a Longitudinal Student Tracking Study. Research Report No. 06-2. Online at: <http://lincs.ed.gov/professional-development/resource-collections/profile-143>.

<sup>15</sup> Ruetschlin, C., Draut, T., (April, 2013). Stuck: Young America’s Persistent Job Crisis. Demos. Online at: <http://www.demos.org/publication/stuck-young-americas-persistent-jobs-crisis>.

<sup>16</sup> Not listed here is a federal Department of Labor young adults program that has potential for state leverage. The WIA Youth Opportunity Grants go directly to local communities to help young adults in low-income areas prepare for employment and possibly college by helping them learn occupational skills while receiving educational assistance

<sup>17</sup> Reyna, R. (July, 2011). State policies to reengage dropouts: an issue brief. National Governor’s Association. Online at: <http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/1107REENGAGEDROPOUTS.PDF>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Education Commission of the States (2012). P-16/P-20: What states are doing. Online at: [www.ecs.org](http://www.ecs.org).

<sup>20</sup> Illinois P-20 Council (April 2013). Education for Our Future: Third Annual Report of the Illinois P-20 Council, p. 10. See: <http://www2.illinois.gov/gov/P20/Documents/Full%20P-20/P-20%20Report%202013.pdf>.

- <sup>21</sup> National Young adults Employment Coalition (May, 2000). *Recipes for Success: Young Adults Council Guide*. Online at: [www.doleta.gov/young\\_adults\\_services/pdf/recipes-ycouncil.pdf](http://www.doleta.gov/young_adults_services/pdf/recipes-ycouncil.pdf).
- <sup>22</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (2012). *Statewide longitudinal educational data program*. Online at [www.nces.ed.gov](http://www.nces.ed.gov).
- <sup>23</sup> Reyna, R., op. cit., p. 7.
- <sup>24</sup> Arroyo Research Services (May 2011). *Evaluation of the Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program: Cycles 1 and 2*. [http://www.google.com/#q=Evaluation+of+the+Texas+Dropout+Recovery+Pilot+Program:+Cycles+1+and+2+\(May+2011\)](http://www.google.com/#q=Evaluation+of+the+Texas+Dropout+Recovery+Pilot+Program:+Cycles+1+and+2+(May+2011)).
- <sup>25</sup> See: <http://www.progressillinois.com/2009/10/12/dropping-the-ball-on-dropouts> and [http://www.iccb.org/pdf/reports/Final\\_P20\\_Report.pdf](http://www.iccb.org/pdf/reports/Final_P20_Report.pdf) (p. 6).
- <sup>26</sup> See: <http://www.mass.gov/edu/docs/dropout-commission-report-10-21-2009.pdf>.
- <sup>27</sup> Rennie Center: Education Research and Policy (November 2012). *Forgotten Young Adults: Re-Engaging Students Through Dropout Recovery*. [http://www.renniecenter.org/research/ForgottenYoung\\_adults.pdf](http://www.renniecenter.org/research/ForgottenYoung_adults.pdf).
- <sup>28</sup> Reyna, R., op. cit., p. 10.
- <sup>29</sup> Reyna, R., op. cit. p.11.
- <sup>30</sup> <http://gatewaytocollege.org>.
- <sup>31</sup> [http://mepconline.org/images/admin/pdfs/161\\_89192\\_Drop%20Out%20Recovery%20Funds-Final.pdf](http://mepconline.org/images/admin/pdfs/161_89192_Drop%20Out%20Recovery%20Funds-Final.pdf).
- <sup>32</sup> Roberts, B., Price, D., (December, 2009). *Educating Adult Workers: The Shifting Gears Approach to Systems Change*. The Joyce Foundation. Online at: <http://www.joycefdn.org/shifting-gears/reports/>.
- <sup>33</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation., op. cit., p. 8.
- <sup>34</sup> Ohio State Apprenticeship Council (2008). *Policy on pre-apprenticeship*. Online at: [www.jfs.ohio.gov/apprenticeship/pre\\_app\\_policy\\_10\\_02.pdf](http://www.jfs.ohio.gov/apprenticeship/pre_app_policy_10_02.pdf).
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