

Opportunity Youth

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There are millions of young people in America who are between the ages of 14 and 24 years old, but they are not in school or working. Too often these young people are also experiencing connected challenges like homelessness, being in foster care, or are involved in the youth or adult criminal systems; and these life circumstances become barriers they cannot overcome. This disengagement results in a loss of significant human capital to our country. Removing these barriers and empowering these young people to realize their full potential would transform their lives and the lives of their communities. It is in recognition of their potential that these young people are referred to in terms of their promise: "opportunity youth."

The factors that contribute to young people disconnecting are complex and often outside of their control, such as the compounding effects of being born in the wrong neighborhood (See, for example, Understanding Neighborhood Effects of Concentrated Poverty.) As a result, reengaging opportunity youth on a career pathway requires comprehensive approaches that focus on understanding which youth are disconnected in a community; what they need in terms of support services such as housing, childcare, and other basic needs; and what it will take to connect youth to education and training programming to earn credentials and secure well-paid employment.[1]

In this document, you will find an overview of "what works" when working with opportunity youth. As you will see below, this resource highlights critical strategies and best practices, spotlights example programs, and identifies additional resources to support local practitioners' efforts to improve outcomes for the young people in their communities. This is not an exhaustive survey of all of the information in the field, but it will provide practitioners with a portal to the knowledge that exists.

KEY COMPONENTS FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH PROGRAMS

The complexity of the challenges these young people face and the diversity within the population makes it impossible to develop a single or "one-size-fits-all" approach to help them overcome barriers. Fortunately there are multiple pathways to education and employment opportunities that enable opportunity youth to reach their potential. Research and practice have identified effective strategies for reengaging opportunity youth into employment and training programs, education options, and connecting them to social supports. Key components include:

- Developing an infrastructure to coordinate policies, align resources, and support cross-system collaboration on behalf of opportunity youth, such as an existing coordinating body like a Children's Cabinet, or a local Youth Council that addresses youth issues in the workforce development system. Elements of Success Issue 1: Structural Options provides examples of the types of coordinating body structures to consider.

[1] This brief draws heavily from Forum for Youth Investment's forthcoming *My Brother's Keeper Alliance/Opportunity Youth Network Toolkit.*

- Using data to identify the scope of the population to better inform strategies for program development. There are resources that community stakeholders can use to initiate this analysis in their community, including the Opportunity Index, data on the rates of youth disconnection from Measure of America, and The National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership.
- Engaging opportunity youth as full partners in initiatives or program development. Young people have contributed to the national conversation about youth opportunity in several reports: Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America, Don't Call Them Dropouts and Don't Quit on Me.
- Establishing reengagement centers for opportunity youth, like those in Boston and Philadelphia, that offer a range of services (e.g., academic, mental health, employment, housing, and legal aid) in a single physical or virtual location.
- Developing multiple pathways to reengage or reconnect young people to education programs that can meet them where they are with "on-ramps" to earn a high school credential and transition to postsecondary education. New York City's Department of Education has developed a robust system of pathways providing Other Ways to Graduate for the city's 16-21 year olds who are not enrolled in school.
- Leveraging existing funding by braiding funding streams to support programs and initiatives. The Campaign for Youth has compiled a list of relevant federal funding streams supporting opportunity youth in Our Youth, Our Economy, Our Future: Roadmap for Investing in the Nation's Talent Pipeline.

PROGRAM DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Given the multiple needs of opportunity youth, there are a range of considerations when developing programs that provide a pathway to education and training.

- Jobs for the Future has developed a framework for programs that help get opportunity youth Back on Track to secondary and postsecondary credentials. This website includes case studies of model programs and a cost calculator to estimate funding requirements for Back on Track designs.
- Bringing Students Back to the Center: A Resource Guide for Implementing and Enhancing Re-Engagement Centers for Out-of-School Youth provides an overview of reengagement centers and a guide for effectively designing and implementing these programs in local communities.
- Building Better Programs for Disconnected Youth by MDRC provides an overview of key components and their relative effectiveness in program designs for opportunity youth.
- The Municipal Action Guide: Reconnecting Youth through Dropout Reengagement Centers highlights the action steps to get started.
- The U.S. Department of Education offers a number of resources on dropout recovery and reengagement.
- The U.S. Department of Education also offers resources and guidance on career pathways including the LINCS Career Pathways Group, a community of practice for practitioners, employers, policymakers, and researchers.

Considerations for Special Populations

Within the opportunity youth population there are distinct groups, like foster care youth, who have different needs and require different pathways or unique elements within pathways. This is not an exhaustive overview of the diversity of opportunity youth or their particular needs, but the research below highlights the special populations experiencing the most challenges and the strategies available to improve their outcomes.

Men and Boys of Color

- Cities United, established by a network of mayors in 2011, focuses on African American males with a goal of understanding the structural racism that contributes to their realities.
- President Obama launched My Brother's Keeper to challenge communities to address the seemingly entrenched gaps in opportunity for boys and young men of color. The My Brother's Keeper Alliance brings awareness and resources to local innovations addressing these challenges.
- The Opportunity Youth Network's My Brother's Keeper Community Challenge and Opportunity Youth guide provides tools for communities ready to take on the challenge of improving outcomes for men and boys of color
- The Schott Foundation has provided seminal reports on the state of public education and outcomes for black males in America. This work and resources to interrupt the dismal trends can be found at http://blackboysreport.org/.

Foster Care Youth

- Becoming Adults: One-Year Impact Findings from the Youth Villages Transitional Living Evaluation (MDRC) evaluates the Youth Villages intervention for foster care youth and finds that this program improves "multiple outcomes" for these system-involved youth.
- Connected by 25: A Plan for Investing in the Social, Emotional and Physical Well-Being of Older Youth in Foster Care provides an investment agenda for funders, private and public, working to help older youth transition from foster care with strong social and emotional supports, and clear pathways to education and employment.
- The National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children and Youth provides data, research, and direct assistance to help practitioners improve education outcomes for foster youth.
- The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative offers a wealth of research and other resources, including a site implementation toolkit and a core strategies rubric for improving outcomes for foster care youth.

Homeless Youth

- Homelessness, or not having a secure home, has a compounding effect on the challenges that young people face. What Works to End Youth Homelessness? provides strategies and trainings for local practitioners trying to get young people connected to secure housing.
- National Center for Homeless Education operates the U.S. Department of Education's technical assistance center for educating homeless children and youth.
- National Network for Youth is a national membership organization advocating for policy, funding, and supports for homeless youth.

Youth in the Juvenile Criminal Justice System

- Improving Transition Outcomes for Youth Involved in the Juvenile Justice System: Practical Considerations provides research and highlights best practices for implementing multi-agency solutions for preventing juvenile incarceration and helping young people successfully transition after incarceration.
- Making the Right Turn: A Guide about Improving Transition Outcomes for Youth Involved in the Juvenile Correction Systems provides guidance for practitioners based on research and demonstrated best practices to support youth in juvenile corrections, and builds a roadmap for transitions after incarceration.

Examples of Opportunity Youth Programs

Programs to improve outcomes for opportunity youth have been developed in isolation and as part of larger place-based efforts. The programs and initiatives listed below exemplify these efforts.

- Diploma Plus provides personalized alternative education schools that offer a performance-based curriculum or competency-based education in small school settings that integrate planning for postsecondary education and careers as well as transition support. The model operates in partnership with school districts, community partners, and employers.
- Gateway to College establishes sustainable partnerships between high schools, employers, and postsecondary institutions to offer students that have dropped out of high school and students on the verge of dropping out a chance to earn a high school diploma while also earning college credits. The website provides information on the Gateway to College Model, the Gateway to College Network program locations, and its signature student support system.
- Graduation: A Team Effort (GATE) was designed to align dropout prevention, intervention, and reengagement efforts across Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, as well as other state agencies, statewide youth-serving organizations, and regional and local education agencies. The state has an "Open Doors" policy to provide education and other services to students that are not on track to graduate by age 21. Resources supporting this work include: Integrated Student Support Framework and Essential Elements of a Comprehensive Dropout Prevention, Intervention, and Retrieval System.
- MontgomeryWorks Correctional Facility-based One-Stop Career Center is an innovative partnership between the local Workforce Investment Board and the Department of Correction and Rehabilitation as part of Maryland's Reentry for All initiative. Similar to other one-stop centers, individuals can access employment and job-readiness services and other comprehensive supports in the correctional facility.
- PACE Center for Girls is a nationally recognized, research-based model that offers a gender-responsive asset-building program model addressing the needs of middle and high school-aged girls at risk of entering the juvenile justice system. This Florida program integrates academics, life management, case management, service learning, parental engagement, and transitional services into a holistic, non-residential program.
- The Road Map Project is a regional effort aimed at improving education and student achievement from cradle to college and career in South King County and South Seattle. The Road Map Project has a cross-sector Opportunity Youth Action Plan that sets a vision for systems building that will create better coordinated and aligned pathways to reconnect opportunity youth in their region.
- Roca operates an evidence-based Intervention Model for High-Risk Young People, including programs for young men and Roca's High-Risk Young Mothers Program that serves pregnant and single mothers ages 16-24 years old. A case study describing the program and its impressive outcomes was released in 2015.
- YesPhilly Accelerated High School integrates counseling, media arts and technology skills, and academic instruction to meet Pennsylvania standards for high school. In partnership with the Community College of Philadelphia, the graduates also receive support for making the transition to postsecondary education.

Funding Opportunities for Opportunity Youth Programs

There are multiple funding streams, at the federal, state, and local level that can be used to fund programs for opportunity youth. A few of them are included here, but stakeholders should know that creativity is essential for funding and sustaining education and training programs for opportunity youth, especially when providing critical social supports to promote young people's persistence in these programs. An overview of the more prominent funding streams is provided below.

The federal government is a significant investor in opportunity youth programming.

- The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), formerly known as the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), increases the proportion of federal Title I workforce funds to be spent on out-of-school youth in local education and training programs. Guidance about applying for WIOA funding has been provided by CLASP's WIOA Game Plan, the Enough is Known for Action series from Brandeis University's Center for Youth and Communities and the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration, and Heartland Alliance's WIOA Planning Implementation Toolkit.
- The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), formerly known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, shows unprecedented support for career and technical education (CTE), which have been shown to be critical programming strategies for opportunity youth.
- The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Perkins) includes state and discretionary grants and is available to support high school and postsecondary career and technical education programs across the nation. The Perkins Collaborative Resource Network provides resources for using this funding to support career and technical education programming for youth and young adults.
- Through the federal Corporation for National and Community Service, the Social Innovation Fund helps communities scale solutions to long-standing problems, including improving outcomes for opportunity youth. This agency manages a portfolio of SIF grants to communities, including the SIF Classic, SIF Pay for Success, and the Knowledge Initiative.

State and local funding has also been used to support programming for opportunity youth.

- Some states tie education funding to students rather than schools. California, Oregon, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin are among the states allowing "per-pupil" or "average daily attendance" funding to follow students who have dropped out of the school district into alternative education settings (e.g., adult education, high school completion programs and schools, dual enrollment programs, and community college programs).
- Fiscal maps make it possible to identify and maximize the complex web of funding at the local level available to support opportunity youth programs; New Orleans and Washington, DC, are examples.

Private/public funding partnerships are critical for opportunity youth programs as well.

- The Forum for Youth Investment has developed resources to help stakeholders map funding for children and youth in general: Adding It Up—Brochure, Rationale and Guide to Mapping Public Resources for Children, Youth & Families.

The Evidence Base for Opportunity Youth Approaches

There is a great deal of research about the importance of education, workforce development programming, and wraparound supports to (re)connect youth and young adults to credentials and employment. The research highlighted below represents a sample of recent studies, briefs, and reports from leading experts in the field to guide stakeholders' efforts to understand the range of needs of opportunity youth in their communities and develop and sustain the programming necessary to improve outcomes for this very diverse population.

For community stakeholders who are trying to build a collaboration to address the needs facing opportunity youth:

- Research briefs Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth (from FSG), and Beyond City Limits (from National League of Cities), provide guidance for local stakeholders who are interested in developing cross-sector, collaborative approaches to improving outcomes for opportunity youth.
- Designing for Success: Lessons Learned in Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund Sites shares lessons learned from communities across many regions to improve outcomes for opportunity youth.

For community stakeholders trying to just understand the size and range of needs facing opportunity youth:

- A brief called Historical Report of Opportunity provides a useful context of opportunity or lack of opportunity contributing to "disconnection" for many young people over time.
- Zeroing in on Place and Race provides an in-depth look at how young people currently fare in cities across the country, with a particular lens on racial inequities and the implications for place-based work.

For community stakeholders trying to identify the most effective or most promising reengagement strategies:

- Back to School: Exploring Promising Practices for Re-engaging Young People in Secondary Education examines the effectiveness of reengagement strategies from the perspective of opportunity youth.
- Connecting Youth and Strengthening Communities provides research on the impact of effective strategies to connect young people to a range of civic engagement opportunities.
- National Roadmap for Opportunity Youth provides an overview of research, best practices, and action steps for communities working to reconnect opportunity youth to education, training, and social supports.
- Reengagement: Bringing Students Back to America's Schools describes the efforts of communities across the country to develop and implement strategies to reengage opportunity youth with education pathways.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There are national organizations who support networks of communities addressing challenges facing opportunity youth. Following the work of these national organizations and their networks will provide essential information for local work with opportunity youth.

- Aspen Forum for Community Solutions with technical assistance from Jobs for the Future sponsors the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, a funding collaborative investing in community-based solutions in 21 communities across the country implementing plans for improving education and employment outcomes for opportunity youth.
- Center for Law and Social Policy disseminates research, policy, and best practices for improving the lives of vulnerable populations, including opportunity youth, and serves as the convenor for the national Communities Collaborating to Reconnect Youth Network.
- Civic Enterprises advances education initiatives and strategies for improving economic mobility for the most income-disadvantaged Americans. Critical to this effort is their work to reduce the dropout rate and increase graduation for America's youth through GradNation and American Graduate.
- Forum for Youth Investment (FYI) works with stakeholders to advance state and federal policy and funding strategies to make sure that young people, especially opportunity youth, are "ready for life." FYI provides technical assistance for the Opportunity Youth Network, working to connect opportunity youth to education and employment pathways.
- Forward Change Consulting offers expert support to communities, government agencies, and other stakeholders around diverse topics including youth workforce development and place-based initiatives. Consultant Arnold Chandler's Life Course Framework for Improving the Lives of Boys and Men of Color provides a comprehensive assessment of systemic barriers that have impeded economic mobility and offers recommendations for interventions to improve outcomes.
- Jobs for the Future is a national nonprofit working for educational and economic opportunity for vulnerable populations. JFF provides technical assistance to several community networks, including Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, Opportunity Works, and Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP).
- National League of Cities provides guidance on policy and best practices for improving the lives of children, youth, and families in their communities. NLC's work on opportunity youth includes toolkits and other resources, as well as sponsoring the Dropout Reengagement Network.

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