

DROPOUT RECOVERY IS NATIONAL RECOVERY

HOW FEDERAL POLICIES CAN SUPPORT THE SPREAD OF BACK ON TRACK THROUGH COLLEGE PATHWAYS

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As the country struggles to escape from recession and many priorities compete for public attention, one thing most people agree on is the importance of improving education, and particularly of raising postsecondary completion rates. But reaching this goal will require attention to new demographic realities. Trends point to continuing growth in the numbers of young adults who are most underrepresented and underserved in postsecondary education: low-income young people, disproportionately black and Latino, who too often are concentrated in low-performing, high-poverty schools that fail to graduate them or prepare them adequately for further education or careers.¹ Improving educational outcomes for this large and growing group is essential to economic recovery and long-term growth.

Even in the early days of the recession, over six million young adults were both out of school and lacked a high school diploma (Center for Labor Market Studies 2009). Most of these young people understand all too well the value of a postsecondary credential in the emerging economy, but few have the good fortune to find a pathway that helps them attain their goals (Almeida, Johnson, & Steinberg 2006).

Across the country, social entrepreneurs are refusing to give up on young people who leave high school without a diploma. At the same time, these innovators are demonstrating how dropout recovery can be part of national recovery. National youth-serving networks, low-income school districts, and community colleges are all on the front lines in the push toward a more skilled and productive workforce.

Innovators within these sectors have begun to put in place *Back on Track Through College*² pathways that are two to three times more successful in graduating vulnerable young people and supporting their persistence in the first year of college (Steinberg & Almeida 2011). These pathways offer *enriched preparation* combined with academic and social supports to help young people succeed, create a *supported bridge to postsecondary*, and collaborate with postsecondary partners to build *first-year supports* to ensure that young people get the academic momentum they need to attain a postsecondary credential. School districts, national networks,

and community colleges have enormous potential to spread such pathways.

How can Back on Track pathways be made available to far more young people across our nation? Ultimately, bringing those efforts to statewide and national scale will require policies that:

- > Encourage and reward strategic collaborations across secondary and postsecondary institutions and community-based organizations;
- > Promote investments in models that work; and
- > Create mutual accountability among these systems to effectively serve this population of young people.

Opportunities to support the scale up of what works exist in the legislative and regulatory realm, as well as in the convening and “bully pulpit” capacities of federal and national policymakers and opinion leaders.

INVEST IN WHAT WORKS AND SPUR INNOVATION

With limited federal funding available for education and workforce training, it is critical that investments place a priority on models that work. For example, affiliate programs of YouthBuild USA are achieving strong postsecondary and career outcomes among a population largely comprised of

high school dropouts (Steinberg & Almeida 2011). National leaders should seize opportunities to shine a spotlight on successful programs such as YouthBuild, as well as on partnerships and policies that show strong results among young people who have disconnected from school and work. Existing vehicles for doing so include the White House Council on Community Solutions, public/private efforts such as Graduation Nation or Opportunity Nation, and other national entities and activities focused on economic and community success.

In addition, both congressional actions and regulatory vehicles through the Department of Education, the Department of Labor, Health and Human Services, and the Department of Justice should promote continuing innovation, collaboration, and the spread of established models. Specifically, the reauthorizations of both the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Workforce Investment Act provide opportunities to support effective programs for young people who have fallen off track or dropped out altogether from low-performing schools. The High School Graduation Initiative within the ESEA should be expanded, deepened, and retooled to focus more intentionally on proven dropout recovery pathways. The Department of Education's School Improvement Grants should provide incentives for grantees and their communities to sharpen their focus on investing in models that work for off-track and out-of-school youth.

Congress also should continue to invest in research and development around new school and program models that show promise in improving secondary, postsecondary, and career results among low-income, disconnected youth. Funding streams such as Investing in Innovation (i3) and the Workforce Innovation Fund are potential vehicles to support such research and development.

SIMPLIFY ELIGIBILITY, REPORTING, AND BLENDING OF FUNDS

A number of policy barriers hinder the spread of promising *Back On Track* pathways. Key among these are: fragmented data systems, restrictive eligibility, restrictions on the use of funds, and misaligned reporting requirements. These barriers make it extremely difficult to blend funding streams strategically or to identify and serve disconnected youth in ways that support postsecondary attainment for this population of young people.

Youth who are disconnected are, by definition, outside the country's organized systems for education and training. At the same time, many of these young people are eligible

for a variety of services offered by different agencies and through different funding streams. Entrepreneurial *Back on Track* programs are notable for the way they blend various sources of funding to create seamless, supported pathways that support young people on the journey to productive adulthood (Thakur & Henry 2005).

Far more educators would replicate what works if eligibility criteria, uses of funds, and reporting requirements were aligned and simplified across programs and agencies. Additionally, the federal government (and states) should continue to fund state longitudinal data systems in ways that inform schools, youth-serving organizations, policymakers, and the public about both the challenges and what works in supporting all youth to success in postsecondary education. Similarly, federal policies should persist in encouraging connections between K-12 and higher education data, as well as across state agencies.

PROMOTE MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Young people have gotten the message that a credential beyond high school is essential to their well-being.³ Federal policies and national initiatives should reinforce and support these aspirations toward credentials with value in the labor market.

State and federal policy should continue to hold districts accountable for increasing high school graduation rates among all students and subgroups. This would keep districts focused on providing accelerated, innovative options for the students who are so off track they are unlikely to graduate without an intervention. However, to avoid penalizing intervention programs for serving disconnected youth, accountability systems must give them time and credit for success.

Policymakers should elevate postsecondary credentials as the end goal for all young people, including those who are struggling in school or who are clearly oriented toward entering a career quickly. For example, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education should continue to emphasize high expectations for all youth within career and technical education programs through events, messaging, guidance, and regulations. Similarly, all federal programs targeting low-income youth who have disconnected from school and work should be required to report on postsecondary enrollment and first-year persistence among low-income youth, and they should get credit for meeting these benchmarks.

PROMOTE COLLECTIVE IMPACT STRATEGIES

State and local collaborations can play an instrumental role in developing, sustaining, and spreading *Back on Track Through College* pathways for disengaged youth. For example, Project U-Turn in Philadelphia demonstrates what a cross-sector collaborative can accomplish when it focuses tightly on finding solutions for disconnected young people, sustains the engagement of high level leaders, and is coordinated by a well-respected local organization such as the Philadelphia Youth Network. Over the past five years, public and private investments totaling \$100 million have helped support the city's *Back on Track* Accelerated Schools and other programming to support reengagement and more effective education for these young people (Allen 2010).

State and national policy should recognize and support the promise and power of such collaboration. The White House Council on Community Solutions and the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs have done this at the federal level. Now they should leverage their existing collaboratives and develop a cross-sector, cross-agency comprehensive plan to promote postsecondary success among disconnected youth.

Federal policies and programs can also encourage state and local collaboration. Within the Department of Education's purview, School Improvement Grants and the High School Graduation Initiative should require further community collaboration around dropout prevention and recovery, ensuring comprehensive and sustained services. Likewise, provisions in the Senate draft of the Workforce Investment Act reauthorization and in the RAISE UP Act (S. 1608/H.R. 3982) would support state and local collaboratives.

HARNESS EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

Employers play an essential role in helping to create education and career pathways through apprenticeships and training opportunities for low-income and disconnected young adults, and many forward-thinking employers are involved in efforts to improve outcomes for this population, for example, through YouthBuild, Year Up, and other proven programs.⁴ However, to reach the critical mass required to impact large numbers of youth, incentives are needed to get many more employers to the table as partners.

The Disconnected Youth Opportunity Tax Credit in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2010 took a step in that direction. Until this provision expired August 31, 2011, it provided a tax credit to employers who hired

disconnected youth.⁵ Making such a credit permanent, and combining it with incentives to provide training and internships, would demonstrate to employers that helping low-income young people succeed is key to economic sustainability.

The federal government also should commit a portion of its infrastructure investments to improving the futures of low-income and disengaged youth. Entry-level and mid-level skilled jobs within infrastructure-related industries should be allocated to hiring economically disadvantaged populations, including young people 18-26 years old. In addition, education and training for these employees should be tied to high-demand career tracks.

All of these recommendations point in one direction: harnessing and supporting the energy of entrepreneurs on the front lines of bringing disconnected young people into the mainstream of the U.S. economy. Enabling many thousands of young people to gain momentum into and through postsecondary credentials would go a long way toward diminishing losses at key junctures along the education pipeline and transforming a subsequent drain on institutions and the economy into pathways to recovery.



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Jobs for the Future develops, implements, and promotes new education and workforce strategies that help communities, states, and the nation compete in a global economy. In more than 200 communities across 43 states, JFF works with its partners to improve the pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers.

BACK ON TRACK PATHWAYS THROUGH POSTSECONDARY



Back on Track models are the next generation of alternative schools and programs, designed to prepare off-track and out-of-school youth for college and career success. Jobs for the Future has developed a *Back on Track* design that incorporates three phases: Enriched Preparation, Postsecondary Bridging, and First-year Supports. *Back on Track* schools and programs offer rich academic preparation and a clear path through college, supporting young people who have fallen off track from graduation or dropped out to reengage and achieve their postsecondary ambitions.

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Pathway to Recovery: Implementing a Back on Track Through College Model, an accompanying report from Jobs for the Future, highlights the experience of the *Postsecondary Success Initiative*, an ambitious effort to create momentum toward postsecondary credits and credentials among young people who are low income, mostly minority, and disconnected from both the educational and workforce systems. The initiative is a collaboration of JFF, YouthBuild USA, the National Youth Employment Coalition, and the Corps Network.

Pathway to Recovery, as well as *Back on Track Through College* tools and other resources, are available from Jobs for the Future online at www.backontrackdesigns.org.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Youth of color now represent the majority of public school students in the South and the West. The rest of the nation will follow suit within the next decade or so. The southern states, along with California and New Mexico, are also home to public schools where the majority of the students are low-income. See: <http://www.southerneducation.org/showTeaser.asp?did=620> <http://www.census.gov/PressRelease/www/releases/archives/population/012496.html>.
- ² JFF uses a broad definition of "college" to include community colleges, technical colleges, four-year colleges, apprenticeships, and shorter-term career credential programs with labor market value.
- ³ See for example, Almeida, Johnson, & Steinberg (2006) and Roderick (2006).
- ⁴ Year Up is a one-year, intensive training program that provides urban young adults 18-24, with a unique combination of technical and professional skills, college credits, an educational stipend and corporate internship. See: <http://www.yearup.org>.
- ⁵ Individuals qualify as disconnected youths if they are between the ages of 16 and 25 and have not been regularly employed or attended school in the past six months.



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