Building a Learning Agenda Around Disconnected Youth

Dan Bloom
Saskia Levy Thompson
Rob Ivry

March 2010

For information about MDRC and copies of our publications, see our Web site: www.mdrc.org.

Abstract

In December 2007, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation gave MDRC a grant to conduct reconnaissance on promising strategies to reengage disconnected young people and improve their long-term outcomes. The primary objective of the grant was to identify key leverage points for future investment by government and foundations. MDRC consulted with researchers and policy experts, reviewed the results of completed and ongoing evaluations of youth programs, visited a number of innovative youth programs and cities with strong youth strategies, and hosted a meeting of youth practitioners.

The goal of the paper's recommendations is to develop a menu of approaches for the heterogeneous population of disconnected youth — analogous in some ways to the multiple pathways that are being developed for high school students. The recommendations fall into two broad categories: building knowledge about mature, existing programs (to better understand whether they work, for whom, and why) and investment in developing and/or scaling up new programs that address areas of unmet need, such as efforts to restructure General Educational Development (GED) preparation programs so that they are more tightly linked with postsecondary programs, both occupational and academic; new "leg-up" strategies for older youth with very low basic skill levels, for whom a GED may not be a realistic goal; and new strategies to engage young people who are more profoundly disconnected and unlikely to volunteer for youth programs.

Contents

List of Tables and Boxes

Table

Box

Part 1

Introduction

In December 2007, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation gave MDRC a grant to conduct reconnaissance on promising strategies to reengage disconnected young people and improve their long-term outcomes. The Foundation's overall strategy for reducing intergenerational poverty aims to double the number of low-income people who earn a postsecondary credential by age 26. The immediate focus is on low-income young people who are pursuing postsecondary education or who have completed high school and are working, usually in low-paying jobs. However, the Foundation also identified more disconnected young people — high school dropouts who are neither in school nor working — as a priority for research and development activities. The grant to MDRC, which has a long history of developing and evaluating program strategies for disconnected youth, is part of that research effort.

Activities

The primary objective of the grant, and this paper, was to identify key leverage points for future investment by government and foundations. The broader activities associated with this grant were organized around several guiding questions:

- How do we understand the population of young people referred to as Disconnected Youth? Are there particular subgroups that are better or less served within this broader target group?

- What is known about programs targeted toward this population? Is there evidence about what works, for whom, and under what circumstances?

- What promising practices are in use today? Are there lessons from the field that should inform future efforts?

- What is being done at the city and system level? What policy changes at the local, state, and/or federal level would best support disconnected young people?

Accordingly, during 2008 and early 2009, MDRC used the Gates Foundation grant, along with other complementary funding, to explore these questions through a series of activities:

- **Consultation with researchers and policy experts.** MDRC met with several academic experts in the youth field (Ron Ferguson, Richard Murnane,

Harry Holzer) as well as other experts like Cliff Johnson, Mike Smith, and Peter Kleinbard. We participated in several policy convenings: the Georgetown Center on Poverty, Inequality and Public Policy's Meeting on Youth; the First Focus policy group's convening on the same topic, which included representatives from the Campaign for Youth, Jobs for the Future, and other key voices in the field; and the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Learning Exchange on Multiple Pathways.

- **Research review.** MDRC conducted a review of rigorous evaluations of second-chance programs for youth over the past 30 years. We also reviewed descriptive studies on the magnitude of the disconnection problem and the characteristics of youth who become disconnected.

- **Program visits.** MDRC staff conducted a number of site visits to learn more about promising programs targeting disadvantaged youth. The programs we visited included Gateway to College programs in Portland, OR, and Philadelphia; Our Piece of the Pie in Hartford, CT; Larkin Street in San Francisco; a Young Adult Borough Center in Queens, NY (part of New York City's Multiple Pathways initiative); Year Up in New York City; Youth Development Institute in New York City (to review their Community Education Pathways to Success program); and the Youth Employment Partnership in Oakland.

- **Practitioners Roundtable.** MDRC organized a meeting of youth practitioners at our offices to discuss strategies for engaging disconnected youth. Participants included Molly Baldwin from Roca (Boston), Suzanne Lynn from the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, Lori Godorov from The Work Group (NJ), and representatives from East Side Settlement (Bronx) and Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow (Brooklyn), as well as several of the programs we visited.

- **City visits.** MDRC visited several cities to meet with city officials to learn about broader, "systems"-focused efforts to reengage disconnected youth. City visits included New York, Portland, OR, Baltimore, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia, as well as a review of system-level efforts in Boston, San Jose, Las Vegas, and Washington, DC.

Opportunities in the Current Policy Environment

The policy environment is ripe for an increased investment in strategies to improve the educational outcomes and employment prospects for at-risk youth. The short-term impetus comes from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which has a variety of channels to create subsidized job opportunities for at-risk youth, from summer jobs to job creation opportunities supported by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and local matches. This has led to a revitalization of a summer jobs program,[1] which many labor economists believe is vital to reverse the decline of youth joblessness, to build work-readiness skills, and to help youth get a foothold in the labor market.

The longer-term impetus comes from President Obama's proposed American Graduation Initiative and the legislation that is currently pending in Congress, which will create a variety of opportunities to improve college readiness, affordability, and persistence, and build stronger on-ramps between established youth and General Educational Development (GED) programs and community college certificate, training, and degree programs. There is an expectation that for the president to meet the goal of an additional 5 million college graduates by 2020, we cannot rely solely on the traditional pathway to higher education for rising high school seniors. We must also find ways to recapture young people who are on the margins and have dropped out but have the potential with support to earn a postsecondary credential. There are other related policy initiatives that could ultimately benefit at-risk youth, ranging from transitional jobs to transitional living programs for youth who are aging out of foster care.

There is also an unusual opportunity to both expand the more established youth programs and build stronger evidence on their effectiveness. The Office of Management and Budget is pushing for the scale-up of proven youth programs and subjecting promising ones, even if they have already scaled up, to more rigorous scrutiny. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation is following a similar course in the investments they are making or considering. Discussions are already under way to scale up and increase the federal share of the costs of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program based on the encouraging interim findings from the MDRC study. YouthBuild continues to expand with stimulus and expanded DOL funding, and a federally sponsored random assignment study is anticipated over the next year. Youth Villages, Year Up, and Gateway to College are other examples of programs that are expected to grow, but with a requirement for more evidence. The White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation may spur further expansion and evidence-building along these lines.

---

[1]Whether summer jobs become a permanent fixture may be dependent on Workforce Investment Act reauthorization.

At the local level, a subset of mayors are making at-risk youth a priority and mobilizing public resources, ranging from the juvenile justice system to the Workforce Investment Act to try to build a seamless system of services to improve youth outcomes. These mayors are trying to combine the best of what has been learned through youth development with the evidence that exists on education and employment programs. The National League of Cities and CLASP are among the public interest groups that are promoting and supporting these efforts. There has been a growing interest in developing differentiated systems that recognize the heterogeneity of the at-risk youth population and provide a range of options to address their various educational, employment, and personal development needs.

This collective and aligned focus — across public, private, and nonprofit sectors and at the city, state, and national level — offers a unique opportunity to formalize a learning agenda around disadvantaged youth.

Reconnaissance Findings

Dimensions of the Problem

Even with multiple pathways and other reforms in the K-12 system that are designed to reduce dropout rates, substantial numbers of young people, particularly in large cities, are continuing to exit the public school system without a diploma. Thus, for the foreseeable future, there will be a need for a robust system of "second-chance" programs to help reconnect dropouts and put them on a path to further education and labor market success.

At the same time, it is important to note that most high school dropouts do not become persistently "disconnected." A well-known study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 63 percent of dropouts obtained a diploma or a GED credential within eight years after their scheduled graduation date. Even among dropouts from the lowest socioeconomic group, more than 40 percent eventually obtained a GED credential or a diploma, which suggests that an even larger proportion *attempt* to reengage.

A recent analysis by the Urban Institute takes a somewhat broader approach, using national survey data. The results further highlight the dynamic nature of disconnection. The study found that about 60 percent of young people are consistently connected to school and/or work between the ages of 18 and 24. The remaining 40 percent are divided into three groups: "later connected youth" (15 percent), who increase their connection over time and are strongly connected by age 24; "initially-connected youth" (15 percent), who become less connected over time; and "never-connected youth" (10 percent) who are persistently disconnected from school and work through the period.[2]

As discussed further below, within any one of these groups, we can imagine further heterogeneity with regard to young people's reasons for leaving high school, their skill level and amount of schooling, compounding risk factors (such as court involvement, parenthood), and their age, among other dimensions. Public/Private Ventures' (PPV) recent study of youth in New York City identified five overlapping groups at particularly high risk of serious disconnection: older immigrant youth, young people with learning disabilities or mental health problems,

---

[2]Tracy Vericker, Michael Pergamit, Jennifer Macomber, and Daniel Kuehn, *Vulnerable Youth and the Transition to Adulthood,* ASPE Policy Brief (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, July 2009).

young people involved in the justice system, young mothers, and youth aging out of foster care.[3]

One critical contextual factor that shapes the likelihood of disconnection is the startling collapse in youth employment rates in recent years. The trend, documented by Andrew Sum and others, is particularly striking for older teenage boys. In 1978, about 52 percent of male teens between 16 and 19 years old were employed between January and June. By 2006, well before the current recession, the rate had dropped to 37 percent. In the first half of 2009, the rate was 28 percent, and even lower for African-American teens. We simply don't know how this trend will affect long-term economic outcomes, but it is now true that most young people are entering the transition to adulthood with little or no paid work experience.

Findings from Rigorous Evaluations of Second-Chance Programs

Most second-chance programs for youth have never been formally evaluated for effectiveness. Moreover, because the programs are often run by small community-based organizations, the most rigorous evaluation methods are probably not feasible or appropriate in many cases. The result is a gap between the strongly held views of practitioners who believe they know what constitutes "best practice" in youth programming, on the one hand, and the knowledge base from rigorous evaluations, on the other.

Table 1 describes 11 rigorous evaluations of employment- or education-focused programs serving high school dropouts that have been conducted over the past 30 years (a few of the programs served both dropouts and at-risk in-school youth). The table focuses on major studies that used random-assignment designs, in which eligible youth were placed, through a lottery-like process, either in a program group that had access to the program being studied or in a control group that did not.[4]

Although the programs and studies can be categorized in many ways, Table 1 groups them according to their primary service approach. The first three programs — the National Supported Work Demonstration, the Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects (YIEPP), and the American Conservation and Youth Service Corps — relied heavily on paid work experience, while the next six — JOBSTART, the National Job Training Partnership Act, New

---

[3]Laura Wyckoff, Siobhan M. Cooney, Danijela Koram Djakovic, and Wendy S. McClanahan, *Disconnected Young People in New York City: Crisis and Opportunity* (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 2008).

[4]The Youth Entitlement project used a saturation approach in which entire neighborhoods or cities were targeted. Thus, random assignment of individuals was not feasible. The evaluation compared the targeted cities or neighborhoods with other similar areas.

Table 1

Selected Rigorous Evaluations of Programs for High School Dropouts

Evaluation (dates)	Target group	Program model	Sample size (number of sites)	Summary of results
Work Programs				
National Supported Work Demonstration (1976-81)	17- to 20-year-old high school dropouts (one of four target groups)	Paid work experience, with graduated stress	861 youth (15 sites)	Large increases in employment initially, but no lasting impacts for youth target group
Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects (1977-81)	16- to 19-year-olds from low-income families who had not graduated from high school	Guaranteed part-time and summer jobs conditioned on school attendance	82,000 youth (17 sites)	Large, short-term increases in employment; no impacts on school outcomes
American Conservation and Youth Service Corps (1993-96)	Mostly 18- to 25-year-old out-of-school youth	Paid work experience in community service projects; education and training; support services	1,009 youth (4 sites)	Increases in employment and decreases in arrests, particularly for African-American males
Education and Training Programs				
JOBSTART (1985-93)	17- to 21-year-old high school dropouts with low reading levels	Education, training, support services, job placement assistance	2,300 youth (13 sites)	Increases in GED receipt; few impacts on labor market outcomes (except in CET site)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Evaluation (dates)	Target group	Program model	Sample size (number of sites)	Summary of results
Work Programs				
National Job Training Partnership Act (out-of-school youth analysis) (1987-94)	Disadvantaged 16- to 21-year-old out-of-school youth	Education, job skills training, job placement, on-the- job training and support services	5,690 youth (16 sites)	No earnings impacts for females or male non-arrestees. Possibly negative impacts for male arrestees
New Chance (1989-92)	16- to 22-year-old teenage mothers who were high school dropouts	Wide range of education, employment, and family services	2,000 youth (16 sites)	Increases in GED receipt; no impacts on labor market outcomes
Center for Employment Training (CET) Replication (1995-99)	Disadvantaged, out-of-school youth, ages 16 to 21	Education and vocational training	1,500 youth (12 sites)	Few impacts on employment and earnings overall; some impacts for younger youth
Job Corps (1994-2003)	Disadvantaged youth, ages 16 to 24	Employment, education, and training in a (mostly) residential setting	15,386 youth (nationwide)	Earnings and employment impacts in years 3 to 4 of the study period; impacts faded after year 4, according to administrative data. Results appear stronger for older youth (20 to 24 years old)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Evaluation (dates)	Target group	Program model	Sample size (number of sites)	Summary of results
Work Programs				
National Guard Youth ChalleNGe (2005-present)	High school dropouts, ages 16 to 18 who are drug free and not heavily involved with the justice system	Education, service to community, and other components in a quasi-military residential setting; 12-month postresidential mentoring program	3,000 youth (10 sites nationwide)	Early results show large increases in diploma or GED receipt and smaller gains in employment, college enrollment, and other outcomes
Teenage Parent Demonstration (1987-91)	Teenage parents receiving welfare	Mandatory education, training, and employment-related services; support services (case management, workshops, etc.)	6,000 youth (3 sites)	One of three programs increased high school graduation; increases in employment and earnings
Ohio Learning, Earning, and Parenting Program (LEAP) (1989-97)	Teen mothers under age 20 who are on welfare and do not have a GED or high school diploma	Financial incentives and sanctions based on school enrollment and attendance	7,017 teens (12 Ohio counties)	Increases in GED receipt and some earnings gains for initially enrolled teens

SOURCES: Rebecca Maynard, *The Impact of Supported Work on Young School Dropouts* (New York: MDRC, 1980); Judith Gueron, *Lessons from a Job Guarantee: The Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects* (New York: MDRC, 1984); JoAnn Jastrzab, Julie Masker, John Blomquist, and Larry Orr, *Impacts of Service: Final Report on the Evaluation of the American Conservation and Youth Service Corps* (Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, 1996); George Cave, Hans Bos, Fred Doolittle, and Cyril Toussaint, *JOBSTART: Final Report on a Program for School Dropouts* (New York: MDRC, 1993); Larry L. Orr, Howard S. Bloom, Stephen H. Bell, Fred Doolittle, Winston Lin, and George Cave, *Does Training for the Disadvantaged Work? Evidence from the National JTPA Study* (Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, 1997); Janet Quint, Johannes Bos, and Denise Polit, *New Chance: Final Report on a Comprehensive Program for Young Mothers in Poverty and Their Children* (New York: MDRC, 1997); Cynthia Miller, Johannes M. Bos, Kristin E. Porter, Fannie M. Tseng, and Yasuyo Abe, *The Challenge of Repeating Success in a Changing World: Final Report on the Center for Employment Training Replication Sites* (New York: MDRC, 2005); Peter Schochet, John Burghardt, and Sheena McConnell, "Does Job Corps Work? Impact Findings from the National Job Corps Study," *American Economic Review* 98, no. 5 (December 2008); Dan Bloom and Megan Millenky, *21-Month Results from the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program Evaluation* (New York: MDRC, forthcoming); Ellen Eliason Kisker, Rebecca A. Maynard, and Anu Rangarajan, *Moving Teenage Parents to Self-Sufficiency* (Princeton: Mathematica Policy Research, 1998); Johannes Bos and Veronica Fellerath, *Final Report on Ohio's Welfare Initiative to Improve School Attendance Among Teenage Parents* (New York: MDRC, 1997).

Chance, the Center for Employment and Training (CET) Replication, Job Corps, and the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program— focused more on job training or education. The last two — the Teenage Parent Demonstration and the Ohio Learning, Earning, and Parenting program (LEAP) — were mandatory, welfare-based programs that encouraged, supported, or required teenage mothers to work or go to school. While the evaluations tell a mixed story, there are some overarching themes:

In several of the studies, young people in the program group were substantially more likely than their control group counterparts to earn a GED or another credential. For example, in the Job Corps evaluation, 42 percent of the program group earned a GED within four years after entering the study, compared with 27 percent of the control group. Similarly, 38 percent of the program group earned a vocational or trade certificate, compared with only 15 percent of the control group. Interim results from the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe evaluation show that about 61 percent of the program group and 36 percent of the control group earned a GED or a diploma within 21 months after study enrollment. The JOBSTART and New Chance studies made similar findings.

Some of the programs, especially those that offered subsidized work opportunities, also generated significant increases in employment or earnings in the short term. For example, in the National Supported Work Demonstration, which provided subsidized (paid) jobs for up to 12 to 18 months to dropouts aged 17 to 20, the difference in employment rates between the program and control groups was as high as 68 percentage points early in the follow-up period. Similarly, the Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects, which guaranteed part-time and summer jobs to all disadvantaged young people in certain geographic areas who agreed to attend school, employed 76,000 youth and virtually erased the large gap between the unemployment rates for white and black youth. The American Conservation and Youth Service Corps also provided subsidized jobs and generated some statistically significant increases in employment outcomes, particularly for African-American males, over a relatively short follow-up period.

The Job Corps program did not rely on subsidized jobs but still managed to increase employment and earnings in the third and fourth years of the study period — and even longer for older participants (aged 20 to 24 at enrollment). Similarly, the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe evaluation found that program group members were modestly more likely than their control group counterparts to be employed 21 months after entering the study.

The gains in credentials and short-term earnings are notable, but none of the studies that followed participants for more than a couple of years found lasting improvements in economic outcomes. Some of the studies (Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects and American Conservation and Youth Service Corps) did not report or collect long-term data

or are still ongoing (ChalleNGe). In other cases, early effects faded over time. For example, the Job Corps evaluation found that increases in employment and earnings faded by year five and did not reappear (though, as noted, earnings gains persisted for study participants who were aged 20 to 24 when they enrolled).

JOBSTART, which operated in 13 sites, showed no significant earnings gains overall during a four-year follow-up period, but the study measured large impacts in one site, the Center for Employment and Training (CET) in San Jose, California. However, as shown in Table 1, when CET was replicated in 12 sites during the 1990s, an evaluation found no significant increases in earnings over a 54-month follow-up period.

Several of the studies measured noneconomic outcomes such as crime involvement, drug use, health, and psychosocial development — and showed modest positive effects on some measures. Partway through the evaluation's follow-up period, the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program has produced modest decreases in crime convictions and improvements in some measures of psycho-social development. The Job Corps significantly reduced arrests, convictions, and time spent incarcerated over the first four years of the study period (these outcomes were not measured after the four-year point). The American Conservation and Youth Service Corps reduced arrests overall and had a range of positive effects on noneconomic outcomes for African-American study participants. For example, African-American women were less likely to become pregnant, and African-American men improved in measures of personal and social responsibility. Few of the other programs generated impacts on these noneconomic measures.

Overall, these findings do not support the common perception that "nothing works" for high school dropouts. Many of the positive effects produced by the programs, however, were modest or relatively short-lived. Moreover, the studies suggest that even some of the relatively successful programs may have difficulty meeting a strict benefit-cost test. The authors of the Job Corps evaluation concluded that the benefits produced by the program probably exceeded its costs (about $16,500 per participant) for older participants, but not for the full study sample. Finally, while some have noted that young people in the control groups often sought out and received other services — implying that the results could simply mean that a range of youth programs are equally effective — it is also worth noting that the *outcomes* achieved by both program and control group youth leave a great deal of room for improvement. Nevertheless, as discussed further below, the findings provide an important foundation on which to build.

One important study is not included in Table 1 because it targeted in-school youth, but the findings may be relevant to the topic discussed here. A random-assignment evaluation of Career Academies, a high school-based model in which students took classes as part of a small learning community and participated in a career-themed track connected to job-shadowing,

internships, and other work-based learning opportunities, found that it produced statistically significant increases in earnings over an eight-year follow-up period. Men in the program group earned about $30,000 more than their control group counterparts over the eight years, even though they were no more likely to graduate from high school or go to college. Impacts were particularly large for the subgroup of students deemed most at risk. The researchers suggest that the program's use of "career awareness and development activities," may have contributed to the earnings gains.

Perhaps most interesting, the Career Academies produced significant effects on several adult transition milestones. At the end of the follow-up period, program group members were more likely to be living independently with children and a spouse or partner, and young men in the program group were more likely to be married and to be custodial parents. These findings suggest that improving young people's economic prospects may ease their transition into other adult roles.

Issues Raised by the Research Literature

It is difficult to draw cross-cutting lessons from the evaluations in Table 1 because there are many programs and not many unambiguously positive results. For example, the data do not support clear conclusions about whether paid work, a residential structure, or other program design elements are associated with more positive results in random-assignment studies. Nevertheless, the study results raise some important issues.

First, although sustained positive effects would obviously be preferable, short-term effects are not unimportant. When programs achieve short-term increases in earnings or other outcomes, those effects are not erased if the program and control groups have similar outcomes later. It is worth considering whether it is reasonable to expect even the strongest youth programs to produce effects that can still be measured many years later. Some have questioned whether temporary youth programs should be considered inoculations, whose effects may last forever, or vitamins, whose impacts wear off if they are not taken consistently. This raises the question of which ongoing supports or incentives are necessary to transform short-term successes into long-term gains. This is the notion behind the ChalleNGe program's postresidential mentoring program and behind the Gates Foundation's ongoing efforts to build postsecondary linkages into youth employment programs.

Second, it is possible that the difficulty in achieving sustained increases in economic outcomes may be traced, in part, to the programs' focus on the GED. Many studies have concluded that the labor market does not, in fact, view the GED as equivalent to a high school diploma. In other words, GED holders earn significantly less than people with regular high school diplomas. Some studies have even questioned whether GED holders earn more than

uncredentialed dropouts, though some recent studies suggest that the GED does have an economic payoff, at least for dropouts with low skills — although the payoff may take several years to appear. Studies have also shown that postsecondary education pays off as much for GED holders as for high school graduates, but only a small minority of GED holders complete even one year of postsecondary education. These data may help explain why youth programs that substantially increased GED receipt did not lead to longer-term gains in employment or earnings.

Third, some youth experts have pointed to broader limitations of some of the program models, particularly those tested during the 1980s and early 1990s. *Some have argued that these programs failed to engage youth long enough to make a lasting difference,* in part because restrictions on federal funding under the Job Training Partnership Act system did not allow the programs to offer stipends or opportunities for paid work experience. For example, in the New Chance program, which was designed to offer 20 to 30 hours per week of activities for up to 18 months, participants stayed involved for about six months, on average, and participated for about 300 hours.

Others maintain that some of the earlier youth programs were "deficit focused" — that is, they defined participants by their problems and sought to "fix" them. These experts recommend that *programs should not only provide participants with training or a job, but also expose them to a range of settings, activities, and relationships* that are thought to promote healthy development across a wide range of domains. One study identified these domains as cognitive, physical, social and emotional, ethnic identity, civic engagement, and career. Programs may help to fill these gaps by exposing youth to responsible, caring adult role models; by creating a safe, positive group identity among participants; by imposing structure and creating high expectations; and by giving young people opportunities to act as leaders and to contribute to the broader society.

Current youth programs like YouthBuild, ChalleNGe, Conservation and Service Corps, and City Year all adopt elements of this approach, and it is widely believed that programs built on positive youth development principles are more effective than others. The evidence from rigorous evaluations, however, is too thin to prove or disprove the hypothesis; several of the programs noted have not been rigorously evaluated (though several evaluations are ongoing or in the design phase). Moreover, it may be difficult to achieve consensus about which particular programs reflect youth development principles and which do not.

Box 1

Serving the Hardest to Serve

Several of the sites we visited during our reconnaissance — Roca (Boston), Larkin Street Youth Services (San Francisco) and Our Piece of the Pie (Hartford, CT) — offer important perspectives on serving particularly high-risk youth. Collectively, the sites serve a range of young people ranging from homeless youth to gang members to young parents. All three sites have well-documented frameworks that govern their work with youth, which share several overarching characteristics:

- **"Relentless outreach"**

  The term relentless outreach, coined by Roca, signifies the energy and scope of these organizations' efforts to reach their target population. All of the programs mentioned above maintain an active street presence in the communities they serve, fanning out to the places where high-risk young people spend their time rather than waiting for them to make contact. For example, Larkin Street sends outreach teams to the neighborhoods that serve as destinations for homeless youth, while Our Piece of the Pie sends outreach workers to emergency rooms after incidents of gang violence to intervene with the young people and families involved.

- **Safe haven**

  For organizations intended to serve as a safe harbor from the streets, the point of entry is a key moment to establish credibility with young people and to initiate the strong, caring relationship that is a hallmark of their approach. Most of these organizations attempt to offer young people immediate support and comfort (ranging from hot showers to temporary jobs). Additionally, intake serves as the first step in what is intended to be a highly individualized, youth-centered support process. All three organizations use rigorous tools to assess individual need, which go beyond identifying education, employment, health, and housing needs to additionally address issues of motivation and learning style so that services can be targeted accordingly.

- **Wraparound services as part of a clearly articulated plan**

  At our Practitioners Roundtable, the multifaceted, high-intensity services offered by these organizations were described as a "bear hug." Unlike other more discrete, targeted interventions, all three of these groups offer a range of services either alone or in partnership with other organizations. Young people are actively involved in establishing a set of goals and identifying the supports they will need to reach them. A unique roster of services is then developed for each young person based on their specific needs and goals and is closely monitored by a well-trained adult advocate within the organization.

Box 1 (continued)

- **Celebrate success but also be prepared for setbacks**

  All three organizations focus on building a positive, trusting relationship with the young people they serve. However, as Roca articulates in its materials, that relationship is not intended to be "a friendship, but rather a relationship with a purpose." The youth workers who serve as the primary adults for the young people participating in these programs walk a fine balance between coach, cheerleader, and dean. All three organizations have language and strategies intended to provide regular, positive reinforcement, but they also have a toolkit of reengagement strategies for those participants that "relapse" into negative habits.

Successful, intensive approaches like those used by these three groups are inspiring, but there are questions about how effectively they can be scaled up. Some of the elements that seem critical to these organizations' capacity and that are not easily replicated include:

- A long-standing community presence and a specified and manageable catchment area

- Highly trained and committed staff

- A wide array of program offerings, many of which have been developed over time in response to specific community needs

- A commitment to do whatever it takes in order to affect sometimes incremental change (along dimensions that do not necessarily align with standardized education and employment outcomes)

Themes from the Site Visits[5] and Convenings

Stepping back, we have identified several broad themes from our site visits and consultation with practitioners and academic experts:

The dropouts who seek to reconnect are heterogeneous in terms of their age, academic skill levels, personal situations, and the routes by which they reconnect; for some, an academically oriented postsecondary program may not be a realistic goal. Some high school dropouts have relatively strong academic skills and can qualify for programs like Gateway to College that seek to fast-track them into academic programs at community colleges. At the other end of the spectrum are young people with very serious basic skills deficits who are not even close to ready for GED preparation courses. In the middle are a broad range of young people, some of whom might want to attend college, and others who might benefit from shorter,

---

[5]The list of programs visited over the course of our reconnaissance is detailed in Table 3.

occupationally oriented postsecondary programs, apprenticeships, or other vocational programs. Age may be a critical distinguishing factor. Young people who reengage in their teens may find it more feasible to continue their education, while those who engage in their twenties may need work-focused strategies.

> *For example, Larkin Street in San Francisco, which serves homeless youth, has developed a day labor program that places interested youth in paid work opportunities almost immediately (community beautification projects or other temporary jobs). Participants receive a paycheck within their first week, which is an essential benefit for this borderline population that might otherwise return to unsafe and illegal activities for income.*

It is also important to note that dropouts reconnect via many different pathways. Some find jobs, others join formal youth programs like YouthBuild or Conservation and Youth Service Corps, and still others enroll in GED programs at schools, community organizations, or community colleges.

A substantial proportion of low-income dropouts become significantly disconnected from both school and work; these youth may be unlikely to volunteer for programs like YouthBuild or ChalleNGe, which do not do intensive outreach and tend to serve highly motivated young people. MDRC's site visits and the practitioner forum we organized in 2009 make clear that some of the best-known youth programs do not reach out to try to engage the most alienated young people. These programs generally use fairly passive recruitment strategies and often screen for motivation before allowing young people to enroll.

> *As an example, YouthBuild, a national program that serves a high-risk population (high school dropouts, often ages 18 to 21, seeking their GED) asks applicants to participate in an orientation process known as Mental Toughness, which can last as long as four weeks and is intended to weed out those who are not motivated to make a change in their lives.*

In addition, given their strong focus on GED attainment and, increasingly, links to postsecondary education, these programs may not target youth with very poor reading and math skills. This does not mean that the programs are not doing a good job for the youth they serve, but it does suggest that we have a great deal to learn about how to engage the most disconnected young people, many of whom have multiple, complex needs — housing instability, mental health problems, dysfunctional family situations — that go far beyond the academic and vocational realms. Most traditional youth programs are simply not equipped to address these issues.

Although the evidence on long-term impacts from paid work experience programs for youth is mixed, program operators cite important reasons for including paid work in their program models. As noted earlier, young people today are quite likely to enter their

twenties with no paid work experience. Table 1 provides mixed evidence about the long-term impacts of paid work experience. However, program operators cite the importance of authentic work-readiness programs for both training and motivational value.

> *At our Practitioners Roundtable, representatives from Year Up and Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow cited the importance of work opportunities that force young people "out of their comfort zone." The exposure to professional norms and expectations, to workplace etiquette and code-switching, and to coworkers of different socioeconomic backgrounds were described as being just as important as the professional competencies gained from such experiences.*

Particularly for the most vulnerable youth, programs must be multifaceted and long lasting. While many programs contain some combination of academic, professional, and youth development components, practitioners cautioned that the needs of some youth are so great that a level of triage is necessary before academic or professional outcomes can be addressed.

> *For example, Our Piece of the Pie, in Hartford, CT, provides five different "pathways" for program participants seeking to continue their education. The pathways reflect whether students are in or out of school, the amount of credits they have accumulated, and students' long-term outcomes (higher education or employment). The framework is set up such that young people might move from one pathway to another as they acquire additional skills and credentials.*

> *Roca in Boston, which serves many young adults who are gang-affiliated, immigrants, young parents, or homeless, uses a readiness framework that anticipates backsliding alongside any gains its participants are able to make. Roca's theory of action also anticipates that a young person can change only one behavior at a time and that its work as a young person's supporter is to prioritize those changes and tick away at them until he or she reaches a healthy baseline.*

> *Even when a young person has only one compounding risk factor, it is important to provide access to coordinated services that will complement his or her participation in an academic or professionally oriented program. Similarly, practitioners expressed concern about the fate of young people who leave their program. Particularly in those instances where young people have received comprehensive services for any period of time, it is essential that there be some transition plan that ensures a continuum of essential services beyond the duration of their program affiliation.*

Part 3

Recommendations

Overall, our reconnaissance findings provide reason for encouragement. The evidence base refutes the common perception that "nothing works" for high school dropouts, pointing to several programs that show positive, if short-term, effects. Practitioners have accumulated a wealth of tactical know-how about how best to reach their target populations and have developed an array of services targeted to a variety of different needs. And policymakers and city officials are expressing a renewed interest in this population, providing resources and exerting political will to advance a youth agenda.

However, there is clearly much to be learned about what specific programmatic strategies are effective in helping disconnected youth improve their long-term educational and labor market outcomes. Such future learning must take into account the heterogeneity of the disconnected youth population, not only identifying strong programs but specifying the portion of the population that they target and for whom they are most effective. Table 2 lists a range of at-risk populations along with examples of the existing programs that target them.

Building knowledge about what works must involve both the evaluation of existing programs and the identification and development of new programmatic strategies in areas of unmet need. The goal of this paper's recommendations is to develop a menu of approaches for the heterogeneous population of disconnected youth (the lower four rows of the five in the diagram) — analogous in some ways to the multiple pathways that are being developed for high school students. Our recommendations fall into two broad categories: knowledge-building around mature, existing programs (to better understand whether they work, for whom, and why) and investment in developing and/or scaling up new programs that address areas of unmet need.

Although these recommendations focus primarily on program-level investment, we also believe that there is an important system-level function to ensure a full array of services in the community and to create a true continuum whereby disconnected youth can successfully move up the ladder of supports described in the table. Additionally, some of the recommendations (the latter two in particular) would be best suited to neighborhood saturation or city-level implementation, which suggest that they be pursued by cities that have a well-developed youth agenda (for example, the Communities in Learning cohort of the National League of Cities). Finally, there are two overarching themes that should be explored in all of the recommended program areas: the importance of paid work experience and the value of incentives. While both of these intervention components have an almost universal relevance (young people from all segments

19

Table 2

Continuum of Youth At Risk of Disconnecting: Program Strategies

	TARGET POPULATION	INTERVENTION STRATEGY
LEAST DISCONNECTED	**In-school youth at risk of dropping out or graduating without necessary skills**	EXISTING PROGRAMS: • Multiple Pathways (school district-based) • HS programs for low-performing students focused on college readiness/Dev. Ed.
	HS dropouts who are motivated to reconnect and are nearly college-ready	EXISTING PROGRAMS: • Gateway to College
	HS dropouts who are motivated to reconnect and are ready (or close to ready) for GED prep	EXISTING PROGRAMS: • Youth programs like YouthBuild, ChalleNGe, and Conservation Corps • ABE/GED programs at community colleges, public schools, and community-based organizations, etc. **AREA OF UNMET NEED:** • **Better linkages between ABE/GED programs and vocational or academic postsecondary programs**
MOST DISCONNECTED	**HS dropouts who are motivated to reconnect but possess very low basic skills**	**AREA OF UNMET NEED:** • **Basic skills programs that also address professional proficiencies (without prohibitive admissions criteria)**
	"Never connected" dropouts	**AREA OF UNMET NEED:** • **Large-scale outreach efforts to motivate the most profoundly disconnected (including conditional offers of paid work and cash incentives)**

of the population — not just the disconnected — have been affected by the contracting labor market, and incentives have proven an effective strategy in a variety of settings), it is particularly important to understand their value in engaging and sustaining disadvantaged young people.

Evaluations of Mature Existing Programs

We believe it is critical to continue to add to the knowledge base about the effectiveness of existing programs for disadvantaged youth through rigorous evaluations of programs that are mature and promising. While many of these programs serve a highly motivated (and in some

cases, relatively highly skilled) population, it is important to understand their impact. When evaluation results are positive, or even mixed, these programs should be expanded and improved.

This is an area where considerable activity is already under way, supported by a mix of public and private funding. The Obama Administration has shown a strong commitment to obtaining and using rigorous evidence to inform funding decisions, and a few foundations have contributed funding to support studies. There are ongoing evaluations of ChalleNGe and the Conservation and Service Corps, and U.S. DOL appears to be ready to fund a major evaluation of YouthBuild. With the Job Corps evaluation recently completed, this will mean that the largest national networks of youth programs will have been subject to rigorous study.

The next step should involve rigorous studies of smaller program or models that are mature and well implemented and target an important group of young people. The results of such studies, if positive, could lead to replication or expansion of these models. Again, some efforts are under way. The ongoing Youth Transition Demonstration, funded by the Social Security Administration, is testing employment-focused models that target low-income youth with mental illness or other disabilities. Evaluations of Gateway to College and Youth Villages programs are under discussion. Although the federal government should play a central role in funding rigorous evaluations, foundation support is often critical to stimulate public investment.

Pilot Test New Strategies in Areas of Unmet Need

In areas where there are serious gaps or unmet needs, where there are few, if any, mature programs or models to study, we recommend formal pilot-tests of new strategies or models. In most cases, these pilots will build on models that are emerging around the country. For example, while the Gates Foundation is supporting a group of youth programs that are working to develop stronger links to postsecondary education, one potential gap is GED preparation programs, particularly those that are operated by community colleges; the links between these programs and postsecondary academic or occupational programs appears to be very weak at many colleges. This seems like an area where significant gains in postsecondary access could be made with a relatively modest investment.

Similarly, while there are a number of efforts under way to build stronger linkages to postsecondary programs for struggling high school students or higher-functioning dropouts who are relatively close to being able to pass the GED, there appears to be a dearth of programming for high school dropouts — particularly older youth — with very low reading and math skills, for whom the GED may be an unrealistic goal.

Box 2

The Role of Cities

As part of our reconnaissance, we visited or studied several cities that are undertaking system-level youth initiatives. We developed a loose framework for identifying our city partners, which we used to identify localities that met threshold criteria in several key areas:

- **Scale of the problem.** Midsized cities and distinct neighborhoods within large urban centers, where the population of disconnected youth can be effectively quantified, targeted, and monitored seem particularly fertile environments to pilot system-level youth engagement strategies. San Francisco, for example, has identified a target population of 8,000 disconnected youth as the focus of its Transitional Age Youth Initiative. Baltimore's Youth Opportunities program is based in five youth centers and four high schools, each serving one of the city's Empowerment Zones. Additionally, youth programs would clearly benefit from the reduction of risk factors in the community as a whole. Thus, youth efforts should be coordinated or built on local initiatives focused on issues such as crime prevention and school improvement.

- **Political will and innovative use of resources.** As noted earlier in this paper, a group of U.S. mayors have prioritized youth issues. This level of political support for building a seamless system of services to improve outcomes for young people is necessary in order to spur interagency collaboration and marshal additional government and private resources. Mayors and other political leadership must focus on aligning funding streams for youth, ranging from WIA to Title I, and creative use of other public dollars (San Francisco, for example has matched WIA and other funding with general funds from the City budget) to maximize clearly articulated program goals. Mayors Gavin Newsom of San Francisco and Sam Adams of Portland, OR, have made coordinated youth efforts a centerpiece of their political agendas.

- **Cross-sector collaboration and organizational capacity.** In order to provide a range of program options and a true web of wraparound supports, cities must build linkages across sectors ranging from the K-12 and community college systems to the business community to the juvenile justice system and beyond. Cities have the opportunity not only to play a convening role but also to incentivize collaborative development of integrated projects. Multiagency efforts must build upon the expertise and capacity of anchor organizations. Philadelphia is in many ways the model for this, with the 10-year-old Philadelphia Youth Network acting as a convener, a funding conduit, a program operator, and an advocate. San Francisco's neighborhood-focused approach will build on the capacity of the city's more than 200 community-based organizations. Los Angeles' nascent youth jobs program builds upon the strong existing partnership between UNITE-LA, an intermediary organization, the LA Chamber, and the LA Unified School District to offer integrated workforce development and education programs.

(continued)

Finally, while all of these efforts seek to improve outcomes for disadvantaged youth who are seeking to reengage and continue their education, there seems to be little systematic knowledge about how to engage and motivate more alienated young people who do not typically volunteer for programs — perhaps the persistently disconnected group identified in the Urban Institute study. These young people may have an array of complex problems and may be involved with public systems like criminal justice, welfare, child support, or foster care.

With these subpopulations in mind, we recommend that programs be developed in the following areas:

1. **Efforts to restructure GED preparation programs — particularly those that operate on community college campuses — so that they are more tightly linked with postsecondary programs, both occupational and academic.**

As noted earlier, many dropouts do not enter "youth programs," but rather seek to continue their education by enrolling in classes to prepare for the GED. Each year 400,000 to 500,000 people pass the GED test nationwide, and nearly 70 percent of them are under 35 years old. Although it is preferable for students to earn a high school diploma whenever possible, for the foreseeable future large numbers of young people will take and pass the GED each year. The data cited earlier suggest that one reason for the GED's limited impact on labor market success is that most people who pass the test do not go on to get postsecondary training — even though 60 percent of those who pass the GED report that they took the test for "educational reasons."

The past few years have seen the emergence of a number of small programs that focus on increasing the rates of postsecondary enrollment and success for GED recipients and other adult education students. Although college transition programming has a long history in high schools, it is relatively new to the adult education field. A study by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy has identified several models of college transition programs in the adult education sphere. The models include offering student workshops or individual advising about postsecondary options, enhancing the GED curriculum to include

academic or study skills needed for college entry, and integrating basic skills and occupational training in a specific employment sector or occupation.

Occupational certificate programs may have a significant payoff in the labor market. A recent study found that median earnings after college were 27 percent higher for students with a certificate than for those who left college without a degree. Given the difficulty many low-income students have completing degree programs, the study concludes that some students struggling in associate's degree programs might be better off in certificate programs. Another recent study projects substantial demand in coming years for "middle-skill" jobs that pay decent wages. Accessing these jobs often requires some postsecondary training (for example, an occupational certificate or an associate's degree), but not necessarily a bachelor's degree.

None of these data are meant to suggest that an associate's or a bachelor's degree is not important, but rather that postsecondary occupational programs may help students build skills, raise their earnings, and move on toward a degree (particularly if programs can be structured to earn college credit). Community colleges would seem to be a natural venue for efforts to link adult education GED programs with postsecondary occupational programs.

MDRC is currently working with LaGuardia Community College in New York and the Robin Hood Foundation to try to develop a study of the college's "GED Bridge" programs. Over the past two years, LaGuardia has piloted three programs: GED Bridge to Health Careers, GED Bridge to Business Careers, and GED Bridge to College (liberal arts). These programs use theme-based curricula that cross the five GED subject areas and link to the student's vocational interest. The programs also integrate career pathways activities (such as internships, career panels, and guest speakers) into the coursework, and provide case management and postsecondary transition services. Preliminary outcome data are promising. Our goal is to help LaGuardia mount and study a larger pilot and then, if possible, a random assignment evaluation comparing GED Bridge programs with traditional GED test prep programs.

2. **New "leg-up" strategies for older youth with very low basic skill levels, for whom a GED may not be a realistic goal.**

As mentioned earlier, there appears to be a dearth of appropriate programming — either inside or outside the K-12 system — for older youth who have very low basic skills, for example, those who are reading at the sixth-grade level or below. These young people are often screened out of programs like YouthBuild or ChalleNGe, whose success is measured in part by the percentage of participants who can obtain a GED. They are also not eligible for GED prep programs. The problem is likely to be particularly serious for older youth (for example those age 20 or over), who are unlikely to have the time or inclination to spend years working toward their GED.

Some organizations, including the Youth Development Institute in New York and the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity, are working to develop community-based models for basic literacy instruction in an adult education setting. Community College Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs are also intended to address this issue, and some promising home-grown approaches have emerged in recent years. These efforts are vital, but they must be paired with vocationally oriented programs that can help these young people obtain decent-paying jobs without completing a GED.

This is obviously a tall order, since the kinds of manufacturing jobs that once offered these opportunities are now few and far between. However, there may be poor readers who have excellent work habits, strong interpersonal skills, or other important qualifications that employers value. Older youth who are more mature may actually have an advantage in this regard.

We recommend a focus on programs that combine vocational training with basic skills instruction geared to the needs of the workplace. The benefits of housing such programs within different settings should also be explored. The Youth Development Institute program and related city spin-off are housed in community-based organizations and libraries, but such dual-track models should also be implemented in workplace and scholastic settings:

> **Work-based models.** Tailored versions of on-the-job-training (OJT), apprenticeship, or alternative staffing models may be promising avenues for program development and research. OJT models usually offer employers subsidies in return for hiring and training disadvantaged workers, while alternative staffing models are essentially temporary-to-permanent arrangements with extra support. Apprenticeship programs are usually small but receive high marks from employers who offer them.[6] These work-based strategies might be combined with targeted basic skills training aligned with workplace competencies.[7]

> **Community colleges and proprietary programs.** School-based programs such as Washington State's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program combine basic skills and college-level occupational training in a community college setting, rather than expecting students to complete a GED before starting college-level coursework. Nonexperimental evaluations have found promising results. School-based programs could be enhanced with workplace learning opportunities modeled after Career Academies — providing students the opportunity to apply technical skills in an authentic work setting.

---

[6]Robert Lerman, Lauren Eyster, and Kate Chambers, *The Benefits and Challenges of Registered Apprenticeship: The Sponsors' Perspective* (Washington, DC; Urban Institute, 2009).

[7]For example, the ACT WorkKeys National Career Readiness Certificate — now recognized by several states — focuses on applied mathematics, reading for information, and locating information, along with personal skills like teamwork.

Given the more mature age of this group, it will be important to recognize the adult financial responsibilities many of them face. Paid work and/or incentives may be a powerful supplement not only to motivate students but also to address their real financial needs while participating in the program.

3. New strategies to engage young people who are more profoundly disconnected and unlikely to volunteer for youth programs.

As discussed earlier, a group of very disconnected youth is largely neglected in discussions about whether the largest, best-known youth programs are effective. These young people are unlikely to volunteer for such programs, and they are probably not well represented in the studies described in Table 1.

This third option may feel like the highest-risk investment — the young people, by definition, are the hardest to reach and may be the furthest from postsecondary pursuits — but it represents the biggest void in terms of programmatic and philanthropic activity.

There is very little systematic evidence about how to recruit and engage these youth in productive activities. Though organizations like Roca, Larkin Street, and Our Piece of the Pie have gained extensive experience through their outreach and engagement efforts, much of their success seems directly tied to their strong, local presence, and none of their approaches have been scaled up. City- or neighborhood-level demonstration projects might test the effectiveness of such strategies, as well as others, including financial incentives and paid work or service opportunities. Because a large proportion of these "disconnected" youth are actually "connected" to some extent to public systems like foster care, the juvenile/criminal justice, welfare, and mental health services, some of the experimentation may need to occur in those systems, which have a "hook" to get the young people's attention. As noted earlier, MDRC is currently working with Youth Villages to develop evaluations of programs for two of the high-risk populations identified in the PPV study — youth aging out of foster care and youth with serious emotional/behavioral problems. (We are also testing a number of prisoner reentry programs, but they serve relatively few people under age 30.)

Given the importance of neighborhood influences, it may be useful to resurrect a Youth Entitlement-like strategy in selected locations. This approach would saturate a geographic area with job opportunities, perhaps in projects that serve the community. Participants would be required to combine work with school or training. The original Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilots Projects mostly targeted in-school youth, but a new test could be designed to make a stronger effort to use job opportunities to try to persuade disconnected youth to reengage.

*****

The case for increased public and private investment in disconnected youth is compelling. The long-term human and social cost of neglecting these young people — or only spending money on them if they appear in the criminal justice or welfare systems — is potentially enormous. The challenge is how to target investments when there is relatively little reliable evidence about what works. Fortunately, with a renewed focus on disadvantaged youth in the current policy environment, a number of initiatives are moving forward that should provide valuable evidence to inform policy. However, those efforts must be augmented through developmental projects in key areas where there appear to be gaps in current initiatives. Through a combination of evaluation and more developmental pilot projects, policymakers and philanthropists have the opportunity to better develop a full range of effective options that reflect the heterogeneity of the population of young people who drop out of high school.

Table 3

Overview of Program Models Visited as Part of Reconnaissance

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
Our Piece of the Pie (OPP) Hartford, CT	OPP engages vulnerable Hartford youth in long-term relationships and program services to help youth complete high school, receive occupational skill certificates, obtain two- or four-year college degrees and/or obtain long-term employment. OPP's hallmark program, which provides academic and work-oriented training, is	Two locations (North and South Hartford) In fall 2009, OPP, in partnership with the Hartford Public Schools, opened OPPortunity High School. The school will focus on students who are overage and undercredited and who are at risk of dropping out of high school.	14- to 24-year-olds who meet income eligibility for the federal school lunch program; Other eligibility criteria are dependent on the program the youth is enrolling in. Program Size: Pathways – 800 TANF/WIA Services – 1,500 Other activities – 600	Key long-term outcomes for Pathways: educational (attainment of vocational certification or graduation from a two-year or four-year college) OR vocational (attainment of full-time employment for at least eight months or national or military service).	Strong community presence and outreach strategies including a "peace building team" that partners with the Hartford Police Dept. to send caseworkers to the scene of incidents of teen violence (including emergency rooms when victims have been shot). Culture of data and quality assurance. OPP has developed a customized data system. Reports

(continued)

28

Table 3 (continued)

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
	known as Pathways. Additionally, OPP administers a variety of WIA/TANF programs and provides community services ranging from child care to college counseling.				are generated and monitored by staff at all levels with the goal of continued improvement.
Gateway to College	Students, ages 16 to 20, earn their high school diploma while simultaneously earning college credits. GtC students are typically enrolled in both their K-12 district and the college as they accumulate	Network: Currently 18 programs operating in 12 states. The network plans to expand to 21 colleges by 2009.	16- to 20-year olds who have dropped out of high school.	High school diploma plus credits toward an associate's degree or a certificate.	Strong, sustainable funding structure: GtC programs are funded through formal partnerships between colleges and school districts. K-12 districts provide per-pupil funds to cover the cost of tuition, books,

29

Table 3 (continued)

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
	credits for both their high school and college diplomas. Though their K-12 per-pupil funds are used for the program costs, activities take place at the college campuses.				and support staff. Colleges can work with multiple school district partners. Students are generally en-rolled in both the K-12 district and the college, although all activities take place on the college campus.
Gateway to College, Portland, OR	In Portland, three Alternative Programs act as feeders to GtC: a Gateway Prep program for students at the 7th-grade reading level, a GED program called Youth Empowered to Succeed (Yes!)	Flagship of larger network	16- to 20-year-old students who live in the school district and: have dropped out or are "at risk" of dropping out; have struggled with grades (GPA usually under 2.0) and		

Table 3 (continued)

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
	and a GED/ diploma pro-gram for English Language Learners 16 to 20 years old called "Multi-Cultural Aca-demic Program" (MAP).		attendance, have fewer than 17 high school credits; have at least an 8th-grade reading level. Note, if a student had al-ready earned a GED, they are still eligible for GtC. 300-375 students served annually at the Portland site		
Gateway to College, Philadelphia, PA (Community College of Philadelphia)			The program serves 40 students per term in two groups (called cohorts), but they have a very hard time finding enough		

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
			qualified applicants to fill the slots. Recruitment and testing takes up a large amount of the staff's time. Prospective students must pass two tests in order to be considered for the Gateway to College program. Staff estimate that 500 youth take the initial test but less than half pass.		
Larkin Street Youth Services San Francisco, CA	Larkin Street provides a full spectrum of services needed to help San Francisco's	Stand-alone	In the 2006-2007 year, Larkin outreach teams made 6,519 contacts with youth	Dependent on program, mostly job-training.	Youth can access a continuum of employment services:

Table 3 (continued)

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
	most vulnerable youth move beyond life on the street. It offers a range of housing options — from emergency shelter to permanent supportive housing — in addition to essential wrap-around services, including education, technology and employment training; health care, including mental health, substance abuse, and HIV services; and case management.		living on the streets. 3,199 homeless youth accessed services as follows: *Point of Entry*: 1,959 came into a Drop-In Center. *Health Service*: 1,478 received health care. *Housing*: 637 youth received housing. *Education and Employment*: 863 youth served in HIRE UP, with 418 youth involved in education and 658 in employment services.		day labor program, four-week job readiness class, and internship program. The day labor program is particularly notable as it gets the youth working almost immediately and guarantees a real and legitimate pay check within a week.

33

Table 3 (continued)

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
NYC Department of Education Office of Multiple Pathways:	The NYC Department of Education (DOE) Office of Multiple Pathways was established in September 2005 with the goal of significantly increasing the graduation rates and college readiness of overage and undercredited high school students. Since then, the office has developed and scaled up three models of alternative schools: Transfer schools, Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs), and full-day and part-time GED programs. The Learning to Work (LTW) initiative provides wrap-around services at all of the schools and programs in the Multiple Pathways portfolio. At Learning to Work sites, students can work up to 15 hour per week. The community-based organization (CBO) pays the students (NYC minimum wage). CBO staff work with students to brainstorm various job placements. They conduct mock interviews and develop résumés. They also offer on-site internships for people who may not be ready for an off-site internship or have difficulties with travel. The DOE and CBO can also work to award credit for internships of particular merit.				
Transfer Schools	Transfer schools are small, academically rigorous, full-time high schools designed to reengage students who are behind in high school or have dropped out.	18 transfer schools across the city	200-250 students per school Population: 16- to 17-year-olds with 0-11 high school credits. Transfer Schools accept students who have been enrolled in high school for at least one year. Most transfer	High school diploma	All transfer schools are operated in partnership with a CBO. Transfer Schools provide rigorous academic standards, student-centered pedagogy, support to meet instructional and developmental

Table 3 (continued)

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs)	YABCs are flexible academic programs (courses typically held in the evening) designed to meet the individualized needs of students who do not have an adequate number of credits to graduate. YABCs are housed within a host high school; students ultimately receive a diploma from the sending school.	22 YABCs YABCs serve a lot of young adults who have children, are caretakers, and or need to work.	schools won't take students who are not reading at a 6th-grade reading level. 200-250 students per YABC YABCs are geared toward students who are very close to completing high school To enroll, students must have been in high school for four years and have earned 17 credits or more.	High school diploma	goals, and a focus on college. The main academic classes are from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. But wrap-around supports and counseling are available throughout the day. YABCs are particularly cost efficient. They do not require their own facilities and benefit from the economies of scale created by the partnership with their host high school. Wrap-around services via

Table 3 (continued)

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
Access GED	Access pro-grams are full-time educational programs for students who wish to pass the GED exam and enroll in college. Access and community-based organiza-tion personnel work collabora-tively with all students to set and achieve individual academic, work-place, and personal goals.	3 full time programs Students must have an 8th-grade reading level, but some GED programs take students with 6th-grade reading levels.	200 full-time students per program Students who choose to enroll in the full-time GED program come from other high schools and/or have been out of the school system for a period of time. Students are over 18 and want to finish swiftly.	GED	CBO partner-ships. The full-time GED program is not just a test prep; it is an all-day academic program.
Year Up New York, NY	Year Up is a one-year, intensive train-ing program for urban young people.	Network: There are six Year Up programs operating across the country: in Boston, New York City, Providence, Washington, DC, San Francisco, and Atlanta.	For urban young people ages 18 to 24 years old Students must have a HS diploma or	Upon completion, participants receive 16 college credits (in NYC, from Pace University).	Supports graduates so that they can move on to full-time employ-ment and higher education

Table 3 (continued)

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
	In the first six months, students participate in the "Learn and Development" phase with emphasis on developing the professional skills required in the workplace During the second six months, students are placed in apprenticeships with local part-ner companies. A stipend is provided to all participants throughout the one-year, full-time program.		GED; have low to moderate income; be interested in a career in the technical field; familiar with a computer; a U.S. citizen or in the process of becoming a US citizen; and motivated. 75 to 80 youth per class		NYC Year Up offers alumni boot camp, which is a series of week-long workshops related to job search and field trips to employers.
Community Education Pathways to Success (CEPS)	CEPS is a basic skills instruc-tional program	The program has 10 NYC sites including: East Side House, New Heights (Washington	Approximately 40 students participate in	Eligibility for GED prep courses	The literacy component of the program is

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
New York, NY	for young adults who do not qualify for GED-prep programs (i.e., they score below an 8th-grade level on the TABE). CEPS is intended to function in tandem with counseling and other student supports. CEPS is administered by community-based organizations (CBO) throughout the city with technical assistance from the Youth Development Institute.	Heights), FEGS (Bronx),Turning Points (Sunset Park), and New Settlement Houses (Bronx)	CEPS at each site, the majority 18 to 21 years old.		the strongest piece. The curriculum is America's Choice, which was adapted to an adult literacy context and offers a fairly rigid classroom structure (important since CBO staff are the primary classroom instructors).

Table 3 (continued)

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
Roca Boston, MA	Roca is a youth development organization serving the neighborhoods of Chelsea, Revere, East Boston, and Charlestown. Roca provides a variety of life skills, education, and employment.	Stand-alone	For high-risk young people and young parents ages 14 to 24	Education programs: ESOL, pre-GED, GED	Roca's work is based on the premise of strong relation-ships. They have developed powerful strat-egies for con-necting and building trust with at-risk youth.
YouthBuild USA	YouthBuild is a youth and com-munity devel-opment program in which low-income young people (often HS dropouts) work toward their GEDs or high school diplomas, while	National network, supported by HUD/DOL	At-risk youth ages 16 to 24. The average YB program serves 30 to 40 students.	GED or diploma depending on site	YouthBuild has a strong leadership development strand. Youth are involved in all aspects of programs and the organi-zation's gover-nance and deci-sion-making.

Table 3 (continued)

Name, location	Overview	Network or stand-alone site?	Population served, program size	Program objective (credential, other)	Distinguishing features
	learning con-struction skills and serving their communi-ties by building affordable housing.				Mental Toughness.
YouthBuild Philadel-phia Charter School			220 former HS dropouts, ages 18 to 21	YB Philadelphia was the first YB site to grant a standard HS diploma. It now also offers several vocational certificates in addition.	YB Philadelphia is part of a cohort of high-performing YB sites that are developing on-ramps to post-secondary pur-suits for their at-risk population.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.