

Back to School: Exploring Promising Practices for Re-engaging Young People in Secondary Education

A white paper from the Center for Promise
at America's Promise Alliance

**Center for
Promise**
AMERICA'S PROMISE ALLIANCE®

Over the past decade, the country has chalked up impressive gains in increasing the national high school graduation rate. After many years of stagnation, it has increased by 10 percent. During those ten years, an additional 1.7 million students received their diplomas within four years. And, as we announced at the Building a GradNation Summit in April 2014, for the first time, more than 80 percent of young Americans are graduating on time, and we are on track to meet the GradNation goal of 90 percent graduation by the class of 2020.

As pleased as we are with the increase in graduation rates, we are keenly aware that 20 percent of young people, nearly 750,000 a year, are still not walking across the stage to collect their diploma with their peers. An even larger number of young people aged 16 through 24 — more than two million in total — are not in school and do not yet have a high school diploma.

Earlier this year, our Center for Promise published *Don't Call Them Dropouts*, a report based on careful listening to young people who did not graduate in four years. We sought to deepen our understanding of how these young people got off track and what caused them to leave school before graduating. Among the striking findings of this report were the resilience, continued optimism and ambition of those who re-engaged. Those young men and women still aspired to further education, a good job and a strong family.

In fact, approximately two-thirds of young people who leave high school before graduating eventually go back and complete a degree or equivalent. In this white paper, *Back to School: Exploring Promising Practices for Re-engaging Young People in Secondary Education*, the Center for Promise explores the ways to strengthen and expand re-engagement options for young people who need more time or different pathways in order to finish high school.

Don't Call Them Dropouts showed that the young people who leave school early are not quitting on themselves or their future. We can't quit on them either. The young people and the program leaders interviewed for this white paper highlight the hope, the potential and the promise for the future that re-engagement offers. Though these young people are following a less conventional and longer path than those who graduate in four years, we need to find more and stronger ways to encourage their re-engagement and support their efforts to get back on the road to adult success.



John S. Gomperts
President and CEO
America's Promise Alliance

RE-ENGAGEMENT: Offering Second (and Third) Chances for America's Youth

The United States has made great strides toward increasing graduation rates over the past decade — rising to an unprecedented 80 percent in 2012. These gains put the nation on track to reach an ambitious national goal of achieving 90 percent on-time high school graduation by 2020. Even with this strong progress, more than 2.5 million 16-24 year-olds are not in school and do not have a high school diploma.¹

High school graduates earn more than non-graduates,² generate greater tax revenue,³ are less likely to be incarcerated⁴ or need public assistance⁵ and are likely to have better health outcomes.⁶ In contrast, non-graduates place themselves at greater financial risk, do not contribute adequately to the nation's financial health and potentially place a greater fiscal burden on society.⁷ Therefore, re-engaging young people who have left high school before graduating has tangible benefits for both the lives of non-graduates and the economy as a whole.⁸

Previous analyses have shown that approximately two-thirds of young people who leave school eventually return and complete some sort of degree or equivalency. However, re-engagement does not occur by chance. Instead, concerted efforts that provide supportive learning environments create pathways for young people to re-engage. In order to continue progress toward greater educational attainment for young people who may struggle with traditional high school education, it is essential to strengthen and expand re-engagement options.

This white paper explores promising practices for re-engagement being implemented by community-based organizations, one subset of existing options. It was designed as a resource for policymakers, practitioners, and community stakeholders pursuing re-engagement solutions.⁹ For those new to the topic, it provides guidance on how to help greater numbers of out-of-school young people re-engage and how to support them through the attainment of a credential. Practitioners already working in the re-engagement field can use the paper to refine their current strategies or to inform a wider community of stakeholders and potential supporters.

We note, though, that empirical evidence on re-engagement programs is thin. More rigorous research is needed to identify what school districts, post-secondary institutions, and community-based organizations are doing to effectively re-engage this population, support them through high school graduation, and guide their transition to work and/or a post-secondary education. The Center for Promise offers this white paper as the first in a series on an important and under-explored topic.

To inform this white paper, a team from the Center for Promise conducted site visits, focus group interviews with young people¹⁰ and one-on-one interviews with selected staff members from seven re-engagement programs located across the country.¹¹ We also synthesized the existing research base on re-engagement. The report concludes with considerations for policymakers, practitioners and community stakeholders about how to help disconnected youth re-engage, and how a diverse array of caring adults can support them through graduation and beyond.

Re-engagement is the process by which young people who have either left school without graduating or who are at risk of dropping out of school re-connect with systems that allow them to complete a high school diploma or equivalent.



Why Are Re-engagement Programs Needed?

For readers unfamiliar with the context in which re-engagement programs have evolved, it may be helpful to understand young people's primary options for earning a high school diploma or an equivalent credential.

A traditional **high school diploma** is a qualification earned by passing high school coursework. "On-time" graduation is measured by earning the number of credits that a state requires within four academic years. However, students may stay in school until age 21 in most states,¹² and therefore may take more than four years to graduate if necessary.

For students who leave high school without a diploma, several routes are available for them to return. If they have not reached their state's maximum age for high school enrollment, they may re-enroll in high school. However, this may not be a feasible option for young people who are balancing their education with the demands of parenting or wage-earning. Students may also earn a **High School Equivalency** credential by passing a set of subject-matter tests that certify that the test taker has high-school level academic skills. Examples include the General Educational Development (**GED**) exam and the High School Equivalency Test (**HiSET**). Students prepare for the test by studying on their own or taking preparation classes; traditional class attendance is not required.

Previous research suggests that a high school diploma is more valuable than an equivalency degree. Those who hold only a GED have been found to earn similar wages as those without a high school diploma.¹³ However, having a GED does open doors to additional opportunities, such as college or vocational training. One analysis showed that 40 percent of GED recipients go on to college, although only a small percentage of those students earned a post-secondary degree.

Because of these sobering findings, the GED Testing Service introduced a new version of the GED exam at the beginning of 2014. This exam, the fifth version since its inception in 1942, aims to improve the career and post-secondary prospects for GED recipients. For example, the exam's content aligns with critical college- and career-readiness standards as determined by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education. Additionally, the exam has two passing score levels: a "Passing Score," demonstrating high school equivalency-level skills and abilities and a "Passing Score with Honors," which denotes career- and college-readiness.¹⁴ Similarly, HiSET scores indicate whether a test taker passed each subtest at a college/career-ready level. The variation in scores can assist post-secondary institutions and employers in determining which equivalency recipients may have the greatest potential for participation in higher education and the workforce. Changes in the exams' rigor may begin to shift their value for students who choose this route for high school completion.

Routes to Re-engagement

Re-engagement programs typically serve young people between the ages of 16-24 who have dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out of school. They may have a specific target audience, such as pregnant or parenting teens, men of color, or former gang members, and often have unique strategies for connecting with these youth. While some programs accept young people from anywhere in their city or state, others have a more selective admissions process. For example, programs may require potential participants to take a test or participate in individual interviews to be considered for admission.



BACK TO SCHOOL: EXPLORING PROMISING PRACTICES FOR RE-ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

There are four main routes for young people who wish to re-engage:

- School district-based programs;
- Community-based organizations (CBOs);
- Re-engagement centers; and
- Post-secondary partnerships.

Within these routes, there are a variety of service approaches a program may utilize to serve their young people, either individually or in combination. These include job training, social justice, military style or post-secondary partnerships. (See Appendix A on page 19)

District-based Programs: School districts have sought to develop programs to meet the various needs of out-of-school youth while bolstering the district's graduation rates. Students are often referred to these programs by counselors or principals at their original high school. They are typically offered in a traditional school, and may offer classes in the evening or on the weekend to meet the schedules of their students. For example, **Twilight High Schools**, operated by the Houston Independent School District, are open in the evening on Mondays through Thursdays. School districts may lack the capacity to provide the types of supports some young people need to persist in attaining a degree or credential, and may partner with community organizations to secure these supports for their students.

Community-based Organizations (CBOs): In addition to academic classes, re-engagement programs operated by CBOs provide youth with an array of comprehensive services to meet their various needs. Some CBOs offer preparation courses for equivalency exams, such as the GED or the HiSET. Others partner with school districts so that students receiving services and taking classes through the CBO are ultimately awarded a diploma from the school district. These diploma-granting re-engagement programs may require students to have previously attended a school in the partner school district.

For example, young people under age 18 who apply to YouthBuild, a nationwide program, must provide a letter from the local school district verifying that they have dropped out of a local school before they can take classes at **YouthBuild**.

Re-engagement Centers: Re-engagement centers complement efforts by districts and CBOs by helping youth re-connect with educational options. For young people who do not know which type of program is best for them and their needs, re-engagement centers can provide a “matchmaking” service with the program that is best for that young person. Re-engagement centers help youth determine their academic and non-academic needs, such as the types of credits they need to complete and where they can find daycare for their children. For example, staff members at the **Boston Re-engagement Center** in Boston, Mass. will review transcripts with potential participants to explain to them what additional credits they need to graduate. A staff member will then help students enroll in a high school or alternative program that aligns with their needs. Students with more comprehensive needs are typically be directed to a CBO, which often provide a greater range of supports, while students with less comprehensive needs may be directed to a district-based program.

Post-secondary Partnerships: While the three previously mentioned re-engagement models are the most common, programs can be operated in other ways as well. For example, the **Gateway to College** program is a post-secondary focused program that was created by Portland Community College. It has since grown into a national network of programs at 43 colleges in 23 states, partnered with more than 125 school districts.

These are not necessarily self-contained or discrete options. For example, a re-engagement center may point a young person toward either a district-based or a community-based program. Programs housed in post-secondary institutions may work in partnership with local school districts to help young people earn the necessary high school credits.



Learning from Previous Research

In May 2014, America's Promise Alliance and its Center for Promise at Tufts University released the findings from a research study that focused on learning about the lives, experiences and decisions of students who leave high school before graduating¹⁵ by hearing directly from the young people themselves. The goal was to deepen the national conversation about why some young people are still failing to graduate despite historic advances in graduation rates.

Consistent with previous research,¹⁶ *Don't Call Them Dropouts* showed that many students who interrupt their high school education face a lack of support in school as well as a combination of persistent challenges outside of the school building — including family abandonment, abuse and homelessness — which contribute to disengagement from school. The report's findings pointed toward the importance of a stronger examination of re-engagement strategies and related research. This white paper is a step in that direction. It builds on the findings of *Don't Call Them Dropouts* by examining the practices of community-based organizations that successfully re-engaged students like those that were interviewed for the May report through site visits and additional interviews, as well as a review of related literature about effective re-engagement strategies.

A solid academic foundation is essential for a young person to earn a diploma or equivalency degree. However, strong academic experiences alone are not sufficient to ensure young people's long-term academic, economic and civic success.¹⁷ Previous research indicates that young people thrive when they are surrounded by an integrated system of family, school, and community supports, aligned with their strengths and needs, which we call a "Supportive Youth System."¹⁸ Therefore, re-engagement

programs need to be designed so that their core elements meet the demands of the multiple contexts of each young person's life, while building on personal strengths and developing important life skills.

This assertion is supported by research from Dan Bloom, who directs MDRC's work on disconnected youth. He asserts that re-engagement programs should not aim to "fix" their participants.¹⁹ That is, programs should not view young people as problems that need a cure. Rather, they should provide young people with an array of activities and relationships to promote healthy development over a variety of domains. These can include areas such as cognitive and social-emotional learning. This strengths-based focus is a key characteristic of a Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach, and it is at the core of many re-engagement programs' strategies. For example, E3 Power Centers in Philadelphia, Penn. describe positive youth development principles as the "cornerstone" of services used to help young people develop skills to make healthy choices. Furthermore, one of YouthBuild's underlying convictions is that every human life is "full of potential."

A PYD approach recognizes that every child has assets and the potential to thrive cognitively, socially, emotionally, spiritually and civically. Importantly, a PYD approach recognizes that reducing problems is not sufficient for thriving; that is, "problem free is not fully prepared."²⁰ Thriving occurs when the strengths of the young person are aligned with assets in the child's ecological system: family, school, and broader community.²¹ We call this aligned system a Supportive Youth System.²²

"[We are] helping the youth develop in their right developmental milestones so that they can go off and be a positive adult."

Program Executive Director



Evaluating Program Effectiveness

A range of evaluation methods,¹ with varying levels of rigor, has been used to assess the impact of a re-engagement program on its participants or local community. Some evaluations find that involvement with a re-engagement program is related to better education and employment outcomes compared to lack of involvement with such a program. For example, an evaluation of Job Corps, a vocationally focused education and training program for disadvantaged young people, surveyed eligible program applications that were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. The evaluation found statistically significant impacts; with 42 percent of participants earning a GED within four years of entering the study, compared with 27 percent of the control group and 71 percent of participants being employed four years after entering the study, compared with 69 percent of the control group.²

Other evaluations have shown a positive relationship between program involvement and behavioral characteristics. For example, an evaluation of YO! Baltimore, using a quasi-experimental design, compared program participants with similar youth in the community. The results showed significant impacts, with 20 percent of participants arrested and convicted after enrolling in the program, compared with 30 percent of the comparison group.³ However, some evaluations have found no relationship between long-term benefits to participants (such as boosted wages) and program completion. For example, the Job Corps evaluation showed only short-term earnings gains among program participants.

A limitation to these evaluations is that they do not examine what underlying elements contribute to improved outcomes. Merely providing youth with a variety of educational and work experiences coupled with comprehensive services will not always result in young people receiving a credential.⁴ Therefore, while re-engagement programs use a variety of components to serve their youth, we know very little about what specific components contribute to program and youth success. This highlights a need for more systematic evaluations and diverse research methodologies to understand what components (or combination of components) make a re-engagement program effective. Additional research would improve collective understanding as to how re-engagement programs work, as well as how they can best be developed, executed, and improved. Programs can support this process by collecting student-level data, such as attendance, academic performance, participation in non-academic activities, and time to graduation, in order to create a rich data source for researcher use.

¹ Evaluation methods include:

- Randomized Control Trials (RCTs): trials which compare groups that receive a treatment (in this case, participating in a re-engagement program) with a “control” group that does not receive the treatment (in this case, not participating in a re-engagement program). MDRC has performed a well-known RCT of The National Guard’s ChalleNge program, http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_510.pdf. A similar evaluation of YouthBuild is currently underway. While RCTs are often seen as the “gold standard,” they are not always an appropriate evaluation method for these types of programs
- Quasi-experimental studies: Similar to RCTs, however the control group is not randomly assigned. Rather, they are assigned based on some other criterion.
- Mixed methods analysis: Uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods (such as interview and archival data analysis) to assess an issue.
- Case Studies
- Cost Effectiveness Analyses

² Schochet, P.Z., Burghardt, J., & McConnell S. (2008). Does Job Corps work? Impact findings from the National Job Corps Study. *American Economic Review*, 98(5), 1864-1886.

³ YO! Impact on Arrest and Convictions. Retrieved from http://www.yobaltimore.org/documents/Impact/impact_arrests_convictions.pdf

⁴ Zaff J.F., Ginsberg K.K., Boyd, M.J., & Kakli, Z. (2014). Reconnecting disconnected youth: Examining the development of productive engagement. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 24(3), 526-540.

Don't Call Them Dropouts: Understanding the Experiences of Young People Who Leave High School Before Graduation

In May 2014, America's Promise Alliance and its Center for Promise at Tufts University released the findings from a research study that focused on learning about the lives, experiences and decisions of students who leave high school before graduating by hearing directly from the young people themselves. Researchers conducted group interviews in 16 cities with 212 18-25 year olds. Additionally, an online survey was conducted with almost 2,000 young people who had left school for at least one semester, and over 1,000 young people who had graduated without interrupting their education.

Findings

Researchers found that students who leave school before graduating are often struggling with overwhelming life circumstances that push school attendance far down their priority lists. The reasons they cite for dropping out are the breaking point—the end of the story, rather than the whole story.

Some young people who stopped going to school found it easier to leave school than to stay in or return to school. In other words, there were several easily accessible off-ramps to exit school, but fewer easily accessible on-ramps to re-engage in education.

Many participants emphasized the impact of peers, parents and other adults on their expectations, behavior, and decision-making. However, young people who interrupted their education needed more than caring relationships: they also needed connections to people and places to help them solve the problems that got in the way of school attendance and achievement.

Encouragingly, many of the young people who were interviewed displayed strong resilience, and the majority of them had re-engaged in school or received a credential by the time of the study.

Recommendations

Don't Call Them Dropouts highlighted the importance of surrounding high-need young people with extra supports to help them handle risk factors such as a death in the family, an incarcerated parent, housing instability or moving from school to school. Additionally, the report stressed listening to young people and placing young people in central roles to help design and implement solutions that would work for their peers. Their experiences and circumstances allow them to contribute unique insights and ideas in discussions about developing policies and programs and in crafting solutions.

To access the full report, please visit www.gradnation.org/report/dont-call-them-dropouts.

Promising Program Strategies and Characteristics

As programs aim to develop young people's strengths through diverse activities and relationships, there are a variety of elements for re-engagement programs to consider when deciding how to best educate and support youth. These elements include:

- Providing educational experiences that fit students' lives;
- Encouraging supportive relationships with adults and peers;
- Providing reliable, consistent support and connection opportunities;
- Offering work-readiness strategies and practical work experience; and
- Facilitating or providing access to comprehensive support services.

We examine each of these further below. How these elements are combined and implemented will depend on the population being served and the program's service approach. While there has been some research examining program components young people found to be important for their re-engagement, little research has focused on understanding which specific elements contribute to improved outcomes for which populations. (see "Understanding Re-engagement Patterns" section).

Educational Experiences

Class schedules at re-engagement programs often have an element of flexibility not available in traditional schooling. For example, many programs offer evening courses while others offer students the option of attending morning or afternoon sessions. Class sizes are often smaller than in traditional high schools, which provide the students with more individual attention and allow teachers the

opportunity to provide more customized instruction. Some programs leverage online learning to allow students to work at their own pace and pursue their interests while still being in a classroom. Research²³ has found many of these factors to be beneficial to young people enrolled in a re-engagement charter school. Young people in this study spoke of smaller class sizes, schedule flexibility, individual approaches to learning, and personalized attention from staff as factors promoting their success.

Educators may be employed either full- or part-time, and typically come from teaching backgrounds. For example, many of the staff members at YO! Baltimore have at least 10 years of experience working with at-risk students. While some instructors are paid employees, others provide their services as volunteers. Additionally, tutors are often provided for one-on-one attention and support. Instructors at diploma-granting programs are certified teachers, and many of them have previously taught high school in traditional settings. (See Promising Program Elements below)

Promising Program Elements

Educational Experiences:

- Flexible Scheduling
- Individualized Coursework
- Experienced Educators
- Contextual Learning

Work Experiences:

- Work-Based Learning Opportunities
- Professional Development Opportunities
- Access to Training Courses

Comprehensive Services:

- Mental and Physical Health Services
- Basic Needs Services
- Case Management



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“We had these teachers who had a curriculum that was a lot more interactive.... There wasn’t a lot of us in the classroom, so the teacher would work with us and actually twist and customize the curriculum in a way that suited us, and it was encouraging.”

Courtney

Coursework for diploma-granting programs covers core subjects that are required by the state such as mathematics, science, history, reading and writing. For example, students attending Learning Works Charter School in Los Angeles must complete all required coursework for the state of California, including Algebra II and two years of a foreign language,²⁴ attaining a grade of C or better. Some programs also incorporate project-based learning to allow students to study a topic in-depth and tie concepts to the real world. GED-granting programs offer GED test preparation courses, which cover condensed versions of the same core topics needed for the equivalency exam.

Additionally, both diploma- and GED-granting programs may offer non-academic classes such as life-skills, well-being or empowerment skills courses to help young people thrive. Many programs take a holistic approach to meeting the diverse needs of the young people they serve. For example, Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, Calif., offers life-skills courses such as anger management and financial literacy alongside wellness courses such as meditation and yoga.²⁵ E3 Power Centers offer courses ranging from drivers education to music production.

Supportive Relationships

The findings from *Don’t Call Them Dropouts* demonstrate that young people seek supportive connections, which can be negative or positive. Negative supportive connections (such as gang affiliation), can lead students away from school, while positive supportive connections (such as caring teachers), can lead students towards school or other educational experiences. Caring adults who nurture, guide, and support

young people play an influential role in a young person’s life. These relationships contribute to a young person’s overall well-being and mental health²⁶ as well as build a young person’s self-worth.²⁷ Additionally, they provide young people with more social capital as the adults may introduce them to sources of knowledge, cultural capital and economic resources.²⁸ For example, the adult may introduce the young people to a new author or new genre of music, encourage them to join a club or help them find a job.

“They don’t give up on me.”

Shayna

Based on his synthesis of evaluation findings from re-engagement programs, Dan Bloom recommends that re-engagement programs provide youth with caring adult role models.²⁹ Other research supports this recommendation, with participants acknowledging the “persuasive power” of caring and persistent school staff in getting them to return to school,³⁰ and the “respectful relationships” with teachers.³¹ Student-faculty relationships have also been found to be associated with re-enrollees’ improved attendance patterns, assignment completion, school attachment and commitment to graduation, as well as with a reduction in drug and alcohol use.^{32, 33}

“I feel like they give us 110 percent, so eventually when we start seeing them give 110 percent, we give 110 percent. We want to match what they give us.”

José

Top Student-Reported Reasons for Re-engaging³⁴

- I needed more education to get a good job
- Someone encouraged me to return
- I had the time to devote to school
- My family supported me



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The young people with whom we spoke as part of *Don't Call Them Dropouts* discussed similar factors as having an impact on their re-engagement. For example, the *Don't Call Them Dropouts* survey found that, of the young people who left school but who eventually returned, 41 percent returned because someone encouraged them to do so, and 28 percent returned because their family supported them. In other words, they returned because someone took an interest in them and their future. Additionally, several young people expressed that their peers had encouraged them to return. More specifically, re-engagement programs can focus on relationships in order to foster re-engagement, encourage consistent participation, provide reliable support, and support the development of positive peer relationships.

“We always lead with relationships here first, which then brings us to a rigorous academic and relevant curriculum: how does it connect with their life, their culture, where they’re going. But you can’t get to the relevance, you can’t get to tutoring algebra, you can’t do any of that without the relationship first.”

Program Executive Director

Fostering Re-engagement

Young people who are out of school can be difficult to locate. Therefore re-engagement programs may employ outreach specialists who come from similar backgrounds to the young people they serve, or program staff who are familiar with the community and will therefore know where to find young people who are not attending school or working. Outreach strategies focus on locating young people who have left school to help them to see the value in returning to an educational environment, while showing that there are supportive adults who care deeply about their academic and personal success.

“I didn’t have a babysitter, so they came to my house and talked to me about how the program goes and everything.”

Jasmine

For example:

- United Teen Equality Center (UTEC) employs “Streetworkers” who perform “relentless outreach” in the community. These staff members wear bright orange jackets and walk the streets of Lowell, Mass., trying to make peace between local gangs and inviting young people to visit UTEC and try its programs. Many of the Streetworkers have also left school prematurely or have been part of a gang. They may have grown up in Lowell and are familiar with the streets of this small city. It may take several attempts before a young person comes to UTEC’s program center; however Streetworkers aim to “chip away” at young people, and let them know that UTEC’s doors are always open to them.

Encouraging Consistent Participation

After a young person enrolls in a re-engagement program, it is critical to ensure that he or she returns and consistently participates in the program. Many programs do this by following up with students when they have a prolonged absence from the program. This demonstrates to young people that someone notices their absence, that someone cares if they do not show up to school and that someone believes they can do better. Jonathan Zaff, who leads the Center for Promise, and colleagues have found that re-engagement does not follow a linear pattern, with youth often disconnecting before once again reconnecting.³⁵

“Just having the sensation that someone’s looking out for you, it means a lot.”

Andrew



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For example:

- YO! Baltimore’s process for checking on young people who have absences from the program is “Call, home visit, call, home visit, repeat.” Part of YO! Baltimore’s philosophy is that every young person deserves a second chance. Therefore, if a participant does leave the program and return at a later date, they do so with a clean slate. According to YO! Baltimore’s director and manager, “Once you are a YO! member, you are always a YO! member.”
- Learning Works Charter School employs “chasers,” current college students who encourage truant students to return to the program. The chasers come from similar backgrounds to the program participants: they may have left school before graduating, been involved with the juvenile justice system or with gangs, or experienced teen parenthood. They understand where to find the young people when they don’t show up for class, the circumstances they face and the supports they need. They work to make sure a student gets to class on time by calling the young person, showing up at their house or place of work and even providing rides to the center. Chasers work to eliminate all excuses a student may have for not attending school.

Providing Reliable Support

Apart from building relationships through outreach and follow-up strategies, re-engagement programs also foster one-on-one relationships between young people and staff members at the program. These relationships provide students with one person they know will help them navigate challenges both in and out of school and serve as a consistent and motivational source of support in their lives. Re-engagement programs provide students with one person they can trust and upon whom they can depend. As one program director related, “So many of these young people have had their trust broken so many times, that they stop trusting anyone at all.” Investing time in building trustful relationships encourages youth to be more

“They just want someone to actually take time and climb that wall and get to know them.”

Marcus

open in sharing their problems and receiving guidance. Some programs provide ongoing consistent support after graduation by continuing relationships with participants after they complete the program, a strategy recommended by Bloom.³⁶ For example:

- At UTEC each student is assigned a Transitional Coach. These coaches are trained in crisis intervention and mediation and have several years of experience working with high-need young people. They help program participants develop strategies to remove or address obstacles in their lives, make sure they attend any counseling, treatment, or screening appointments, provide 24/7 crisis intervention services, assist with conflict mediation either on the street or at home, and follow up with each young person for two years after they leave the program.
- Ujamaa Place, in St. Paul, Minn., assigns each participant a coach when he enters the program. The coaches, who are all men of color with a similar background to program participants, meet with participants every week to create success plans, review program progress, and work to solve problems in their everyday lives. These coaches maintain relationships with Ujamaa participants after they complete the program in order to support and facilitate their transition to the workforce or additional schooling/training.

“It’s not even about telling them what to do; it’s bringing a lot of these people to the table and say, ‘Let’s talk about this issue... Let’s really get in there and talk about it... You have the power not just because of who you are, but because of what you do.’”

Program Staff Member



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Supporting Positive Peer Relationships

Additionally, research shows that a relationship with fellow re-engaged peers matters to young people. For example, research by Glenda McGregor and colleagues,³⁷ who interviewed young people from five “second chance” schools, found that many students highly valued the sense of belonging and community shared among their peers in these settings.

Similarly, the young people with whom we spoke expressed a desire for a sense of community among people with similar life experiences and who are working towards similar goals. This builds rapport among program members, which may promote program retention and class participation. Many felt they were making lifelong friends with their re-engaged peers. For example:

“I mean, I don’t look at people in this program and go, these are my friends from high school. I go, these are my friends.”

Anthony

- E³ Power Centers have daily “huddles” where everyone shares their name and how they are feeling that day. Additionally, Centers have weekly empowerment classes where young people talk about matters relevant to both the program and the community as a whole, and discuss issues such as racism and equality. Furthermore, they have weekly men’s and women’s support groups where young people discuss topics such as their personal problems, what they want to accomplish in their lives, and ways they can contribute to the community.
- One of Ujamaa Place’s foundational elements is to foster a “Community of Men.” They do this by creating an environment of grace and inclusion, providing

the men with a sense of belonging and honor and providing participants with a chance to relate to men with similar life experiences. For example, the men take time daily to connect by eating lunch together. This also contributes to an atmosphere of inclusion and belonging. The “Community of Men” extends beyond the current program participants; men who have completed the program will return to the center simply to spend time with the staff and the friends they have made there.

Work Readiness and Practical Work Experience

Many programs, particularly those with a job training approach, also offer work-based learning experiences to help youth learn technical, job search, resume building and interview skills, as well as gain work experience and develop professionally. This also allows them to earn money while in school, which for some young people, particularly those with dependents, is critical for re-engagement. For example:

- YouthBuild participants build affordable housing in their communities while working towards their GED or high school diploma. Additionally, in partnership with the Starbucks Coffee Company and the Schultz Family Foundation, three YouthBuild sites recently piloted “Retail Excellence Training Programs.” These programs train the young people as baristas while teaching them the skills needed for retail and customer service jobs, such as how to work under pressure and solve problems as part of a team.
- UTEC’s workforce development program trains young people through three social enterprise areas: mattress deconstruction and recycling, culinary arts (catering and a retail cafe), and furniture design. Concurrently with industry-specific skills, UTEC’s model teaches life, job-readiness, and financial literacy



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skills – along with essential soft skills like teamwork and positive communication. Young people gain real-world experience through the enterprises, and UTEC partners with other organizations, ranging from Mill City Grows (a local, urban farming nonprofit) to Whole Foods Market. Some programs will also cover fees for participants to enroll in training courses at other facilities.

- Homeboy Industries covers tuition and supply costs for their youth to enroll in Photovoltaic Training at the East Los Angeles Skills Center. These students can then take a national credentialing test to make them more competitive in the job market.

“They have empowerment classes as well as education... you will have a job if you stick there and be loyal...”

Amanda

Comprehensive Support Services

Young people who participated in the *Don't Call Them Dropouts* study also discussed the importance of having access to a variety of supports, based on their needs, to help them confront the barriers in their personal lives. Needs can also be determined in a variety of ways. Programs may use resources such as American Fact Finder³⁸ to research community characteristics like unemployment rates, income levels and teen pregnancy rates, or FBI Crime Statistics³⁹ to track crime rates and gang activity. For example, YO! Baltimore, in Baltimore, Md., used census data to determine that 20,000 young adults in Baltimore City are out-of-school, unemployed, underemployed, or unable to earn a living wage, highlighting a need to offer opportunities for educational and workforce advancement.

However, quantitative data alone is insufficient to develop a true understanding of the needs of young people. In our study, several program directors and their staff had lived in the community or were very familiar with the community, which informed their ideas about young people's needs. Additionally, many programs determine which supports to offer by allowing their participants to tell them what they need. Programs can also reach out to people who have an awareness of the community and an understanding of the supports its young people require, either through one-on-one conversations or community conversations with residents.

YO! Baltimore developed some of their program strategies after hosting community focus groups, where residents discussed gaps in programming available to young people.

“... one of these departments was literally just a team of people who just review you and your needs on an individual basis and they would meet with you and talk about what you needed and each basically act as your liaison to all these other departments in the program to work on addressing your individual needs.”

William

It is important to note that determining needs is not a static process. By continually assessing needs, programs can alter their offerings or build relationships with additional community organizations to meet the evolving needs of their participants. This ensures purposeful service delivery.

Comprehensive supports can be provided by the program directly and may include offerings such as on-site daycare, on-site meals or case management. This puts one less obstacle between young people and the service(s) that they need.



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For example:

- Learning Works Charter School, which services many pregnant and parenting teens, provides on-site daycare and will send a taxi to pick up mothers with infants less than one year of age to ensure they come to class. They will also provide transportation to the young people to ensure they attend their medical and court appointments.
- Homeboy Industries, which serves young people with a criminal history or who have been involved in a gang, has a team of volunteer doctors who provide free tattoo removal services to the young people. This helps them secure employment and separate themselves from their gang history. Additionally, they have an on-site lawyer who provides free legal consultations.

Many programs also rely on partner organizations, either nonprofits or public agencies, to provide services they lack capacity to deliver. Building these inter-organizational relationships with entities such as housing complexes, or health facilities allows programs to expand the breadth of supports available to their participants to fully meet their needs. Some programs will develop connections with local employers or colleges to assist young people in moving beyond the program into the next phase of their lives. This element is supported by one of Bloom's recommendations,⁴⁰ which called for programs to create relationships with post-secondary institutions and employers to foster transitions into the "real world."

We found that program directors and other staff members often have an existing knowledge of the types of community resources available to them. Some programs found that organizations actually reached out to them after they became aware of the program and its work. Additionally, program staff members may use community resources such as phone books and 211 lines⁴¹ to help students find a variety of local resources to support their needs.

For example:

- Ujamaa Place serves many young people who struggle with finding affordable housing. Accordingly, they have a partnership with a local housing complex that offers 12 vouchered apartments for Ujamaa men. Ujamaa Place also has partnerships with about 10 other local organizations to provide young people with supports related to meal services, financial services, parenting and more. They were able to build these partnerships through the relationships various board members had with the organizations.
- E³ Power Centers hosted an Opportunity Fair which allowed young people to meet with representatives from colleges and vocational training programs to learn about their post-secondary options.

"They have a lot of resources that make you want to stick with it. They have parenting classes for people who have kids... They'll babysit your kids while you're in parenting class."

Lauren



Considerations for Educators, Practitioners, and Policymakers

Our review of previous research, coupled with the voices of young people and youth-serving professionals, provides areas for consideration when developing, implementing and supporting re-engagement programs. We recommend developing strategies around four key themes: listening, learning, leveraging, and linking.

LISTEN

- **Listen to young people’s perspectives and experiences.** Re-engagement programs should be designed around young people’s needs. Listening to their histories, struggles, achievements and where they want to go in life can drive re-engagement program design in a more effective and purposeful manner.
- **Structure programs to promote individualized attention.** Small class sizes provide for more individualized attention and allow students to be more engaged in their learning. In addition, fewer students build classroom camaraderie and reduce the pressure a student may feel. For example, one program director with whom we spoke shared that many of the program’s participants are remiss to share their educational deficiencies with other students. The smaller program size enables more young people to feel comfortable sharing their stories and challenges.
- **Maintain a presence in the community.** While outreach workers may know where to find young people, potential program participants should also be able to easily connect with the re-engagement program. Whether through word of mouth, bus advertisements or a showy building exterior, a program should aim to be well-known in the community and accessible to the young people it intends

to serve. Furthermore, programs that have a presence in the community may find that community organizations will reach out to them to offer their services.

“One reason I feel like I’m here is, I did a lot of damage to my community growing up... and my way of giving back is by trying to help the same youth that are going through similar things I went through... or even worse.”

Program Staff Member

LEARN

- **Utilize and consult a range of evaluation methods.** Additional research is needed about how to design, implement, and evaluate effective re-engagement programs for the young people in our communities who need an expanded set of options for completing a high school credential. Stakeholders can learn from existing research while encouraging further study of effective approaches. University-community partnerships can be helpful for producing studies that respond to the kinds of questions practitioners, policymakers, and funders have about improving and expanding re-engagement approaches.
- **Examine both successes and failures.** Learn from both the successes and failures of communities and programs that have long-standing experience serving young people.

LEVERAGE

- **Leverage young people’s strengths.** Programs should be attentive to the unique needs and strengths of each young person. Helping youth build and utilize their strengths will teach them how to approach the challenges in their lives and foster a productive transition to adulthood.



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Additionally, it gives them the courage and drive to turn back and contribute to the community or guide young people experiencing the same challenges as they once did. As many others we spoke with shared, young people want to give back to the community that invested in them.

- **Leverage local resources.** Program administrators and staff should consider taking stock of the local organizations present in the community to understand how their work can support out-of-school young people. If there is a gap between the resources needed by young people and the resources available in the community, determine ways to collectively fill this gap. In order to best leverage local resources, consider ways to help young people overcome barriers to accessing services, including co-location of services most often utilized.
- **Leverage state and/or federal resources.** Community organizations should determine if funding opportunities from state or federal entities may be available to support their work. Organizations may consider partnering with a local school district or districts that do not have the capacity to serve youth who might benefit from their program offerings and, as a result, may be eligible to access additional state resources. Competitive grant opportunities issued by state departments of education, justice, or labor may be open to non-profit entities. Establishing relationships with program administrators in these departments is a good way to learn about possible funding opportunities.
- **Maintain high standards for program completion.** While earning a high school credential is an important step for young people, it should not be viewed as an endpoint. Rather, programs should help young people explore and secure options for post-graduation employment or higher education. For example, one of the requirements for completing the program at Ujamaa Place is that participants must have held a job for a minimum of three months.

LINK

- **Provide students with an ally. Provide young people with a caring adult who can guide them in both their academic and personal lives.** This allows someone to have a full understanding of the challenges they face, the supports they need specific to their overall situation, and how to prevent any struggles or negative experiences that may result in leaving the program.
- **Work with outreach workers who are familiar with the community and have a similar background to the target audience.** Having outreach workers who understand the community and who have experienced interrupted high school enrollment, teen parenting, or gang involvement, enjoy a higher level of credibility when speaking to young people as opposed to those who the young people view as “outsiders.”
- **Consider funding streams that support co-location of services.** Recognizing that young people utilizing these programs present a unique set of needs, policymakers should consider additional ways to support the programs’ co-location of supportive services (such as on-site child care).

“I saw the building for [program]. And on a whim, their sign said “finish high school,” so I walked in, and a year later, I walked out with my GED.”

Joseph



CONCLUSION

Re-engagement programs provide an important service to both individuals and the community as a whole. By providing alternative pathways to a credential, building caring relationships with out-of-school young people, and providing young people with supports such as employment, mental health services, and child-care services, programs can help young people achieve an education credential, build qualities such as self-efficacy and self-worth, and foster a transition to the workforce or higher education.

Through site visits, focus group interviews, staff interviews, and a brief literature review, this white paper provides examples of how re-engagement programs can support young people based on what previous research and the young people themselves have expressed. More research is needed to understand which specific elements contribute not only to re-engagement, but also to eventual program completion. This will inform program development and strategies, and allow the nation to optimally support young people who seek to re-engage with the purpose of achieving educational, workplace and personal success.



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APPENDIX A

Program Information for Community-based Organizations

RE-ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM	PROGRAM SUMMARY	CREDENTIAL OFFERED
<p>YO! Baltimore Academy Baltimore, Md.</p> <p>http://www.yobaltimore.org</p>	<p>YO! Baltimore serves out-of-school youth and young adults citywide at two youth-friendly centers. Caring adults provide wide-ranging support services and opportunities for participants to reach their academic and career goals. YO! Baltimore members build important life skills and participate in activities that support creative self-expression and a healthy life style.</p>	<p>GED</p>
<p>YouthBuild, 264 programs in 46 states, Washington, D.C. and the Virgin Islands</p> <p>https://youthbuild.org</p>	<p>YouthBuild's goal is to provide underserved young people with the support and credentials needed to successfully enter the trades. YouthBuild promotes the core values of youth development and community service and provides opportunities in vocational education, academic instruction, counseling and life skills training that strengthen and prepare students for the workforce upon graduation.</p>	<p>High School Diploma or GED</p>
<p>Learning Works Charter School @ Homeboy Los Angeles, Calif.</p> <p>http://www.homeboyindustries.org</p>	<p>Homeboy Industries serves high-risk, formerly gang-involved men and women with a continuum of free services and programs, and operates seven social enterprises that serve as job-training sites. In addition to paying young people to receive job training, they also require that the young people spend part of their working day working on themselves. Homeboy offers these youth education, therapy, tattoo removal, substance abuse treatment, legal assistance and job placement services.</p>	<p>GED</p>
<p>United Teen Equality Center Lowell, Mass.</p> <p>http://www.utec-lowell.org</p>	<p>The United Teen Equality Center's (UTEC) mission and promise is to ignite and nurture the ambition of Lowell's most disconnected youth to trade violence and poverty for social and economic success. The model begins with intensive street outreach and gang peacemaking and then pairs youth with a transitional coach who works with them on a wide set of life goals. Youth develop skills in a workforce development program and resume their education through a GED or alternative diploma program UTEC's theory of change is focused on four specific outcome areas for their young people: educational attainment, financial health, decreased criminal involvement, and increased civic engagement.</p>	<p>High School Diploma or GED</p>

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APPENDIX A

RE-ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

PROGRAM SUMMARY

CREDENTIAL OFFERED

Learning Works Charter School
Pasadena, Calif.

<http://www.publicworksinc.org/lw>

The mission of the Learning Works Charter School (LW) is to provide a personalized, rigorous academic program and relevant life skills to traditionally underserved, at-risk students in grades 9-12 who have withdrawn or are in danger of withdrawing from mainstream education without attaining a high school diploma. LW addresses the needs in the community by offering a program to give disengaged students an educational choice designed to meet their specific needs, distinct from the traditional programs that have not served them well. The LW model combines academic intervention and support, as well as acknowledging that this population requires wrap-around social support services.

High School Diploma

Ujamaa Place
Saint Paul, Minn.

<http://ujamaaplace.org>

The mission of Ujamaa Place is to assist young, African-American men primarily between the ages of 18 and 28, who are economically disadvantaged and have experienced repeated cycles of failure. This mission statement is rooted in the philosophy of African-American culture and empowerment — that everyone is important, valuable, worthy, and loveable. To graduate from the program, an Ujamaa Place participant must demonstrate job skills, empowerment skills, and life skills through the following:

- Completion of his GED
- Demonstrated use of Empowerment
- Remained drug free Skills in his daily life
- No recent criminal offenses
- Secured stable housing
- Held job for a minimum of three months

GED

E3 Centers, 4 programs in
Philadelphia, Penn.

<http://www.pyninc.org/programs/e3-power-centers.php>

E3 Centers are neighborhood-based centers that take a holistic approach to preparing out-of-school youth and youth returning from juvenile placement to achieve long-term educational, career and personal goals. E3 Centers are designed to provide supports along three interrelated pathways: Education, Employment and Empowerment, the three E's.

High School Diploma or GED

APPENDIX B

For Further Reading

Reconnecting Youth through Dropout Reengagement Centers, by the National League of Cities. Online at http://www.nlc.org/Documents/Find%20City%20Solutions/IYEF/Education/Final_YEF_DropoutReengagementMAG2013.pdf.

Forgotten Youth: Re-engaging Students through Dropout Recovery, by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. Online at <http://www.renniecenter.org/research/ForgottenYouth.pdf>.

State Policies to Reengage Dropouts, by the NGA Center for Best Practices. <http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/1107REENGAGEDROPOUTS.PDF>.

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ENDNOTES

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- ⁸ The May 2014 report *Don't Call Them Dropouts* finds that young people do not use “dropout” to refer to themselves, nor describe their process of leaving school as “dropping out.” In this paper, we do sometimes use this familiar term as an adjective or a verb – e.g. “dropout prevention.” However, we avoid using the term to describe young people or their experience. See <http://www.americaspromise.org/resource/dont-call-them-dropouts-0>.
- ⁹ For a discussion of city/district strategies, see the National League of Cities’ Municipal Action Guide: Reconnecting Youth through Dropout Re-engagement Centers: http://www.nlc.org/Documents/Find%20City%20Solutions/IYEF/Education/Final_YEF_DropoutReengagementMAG2013.pdf; and the Rennie Center’s report on Dropout Recovery Centers: <http://www.renniecenter.org/research/ForgottenYouth.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ Quotes from focus group interviews are from a single individual, referred to by an alias. To protect each young person’s identity, the quotes are not associated with the cities or the programs where interviews took place.
- ¹¹ A list of the cities and programs associated with the focus group interviews is included in Appendix A.
- ¹² See <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/06/06/34research-age.h32.html?intc=EW-DC13-TOC>] for more information.
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OUR VISION

Every child in America has the opportunity and support to reach their full potential and pursue their American Dream.

OUR MISSION

Inspire, engage, and unite individuals, institutions, and communities to create the conditions for success for every child in America.

THE FIVE PROMISES

Caring Adults

Young people need to be surrounded by caring adults providing love, challenge, active support, a vision for a brighter future and opportunities for them to take responsibility for their own lives.

Safe Places

Young people need physical and psychological safety at home, in school, online and in the community.

Healthy Start

Young people need the conditions that make it possible to grow physically, socially and intellectually starting at the earliest ages.

Effective Education

Young people need not only a high school diploma, but a high-quality learning experience that prepares them for college and career.

Opportunity to Serve

Young people need service opportunities to help them develop belonging in their communities, empowerment to be positive contributors and a sense of personal responsibility.



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