Connecting Youth to Opportunity
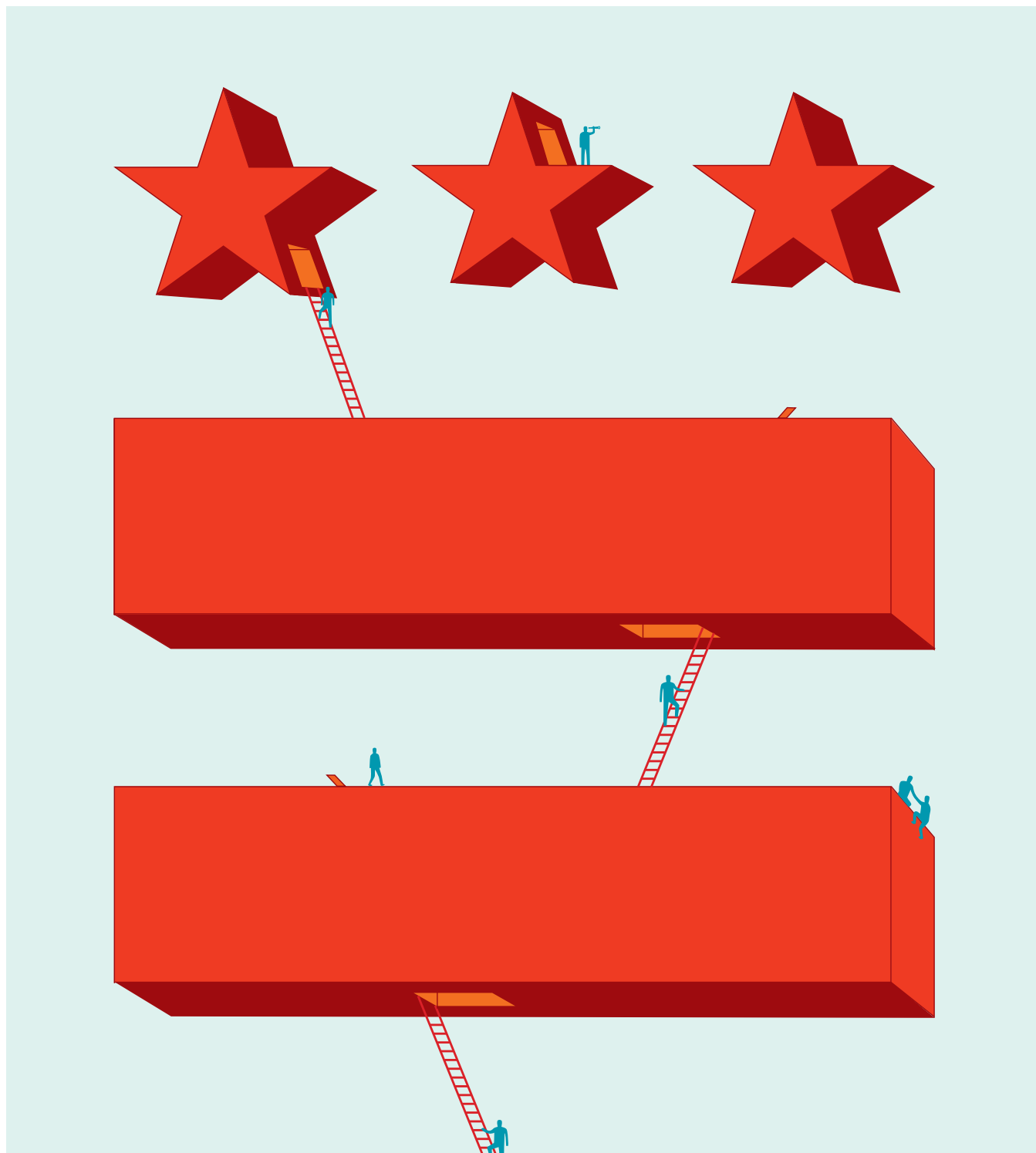
Better Understanding the Needs of
Disconnected Young People in Washington, DC

Acknowledgements

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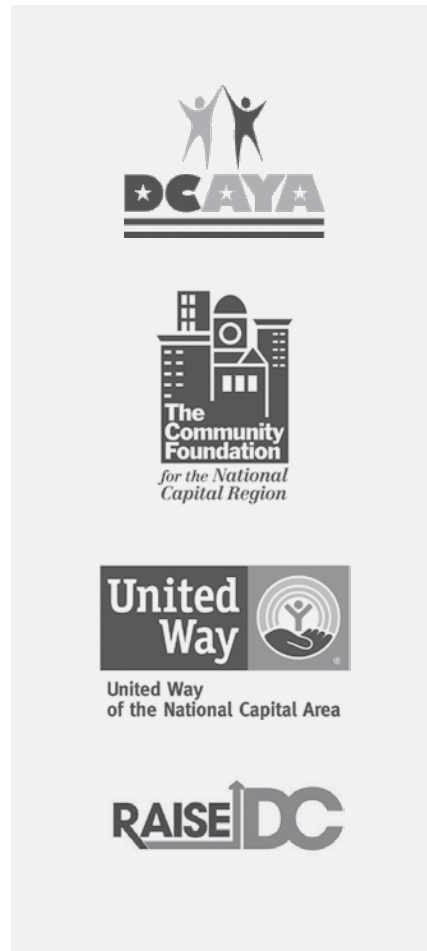
Executive Summary

Educational attainment defines workforce success, and a robust workforce drives economic stability and growth. Therefore, everyone has a stake in developing systems that promote strong education outcomes and successful transitions to the labor market: businesses and employers that aim to simultaneously build up the next generation of consumers and strengthen the future workforce; elected officials who wish to sustain the city's current prosperity and growth; parents and concerned community members who want a vibrant, healthy community; and youth themselves, who by and large want to lead stable, productive lives.

Momentum has been building—now is the time for the District of Columbia to develop such a system. Recent studies suggest thousands of youth between the ages of 16–24 are disconnected, which is commonly understood to mean young people who are neither in school nor working. High dropout and unemployment rates and low post-secondary education attainment rates among District youth have led to a series of thoughtful and focused examinations of how the District of Columbia can reconnect youth to opportunity. Raise DC, the District's public/private partnership dedicated to establishing cradle to career alignment, is leading the charge with its focus on youth reconnection. This—combined with the engagement of the foundation sector on the needs of disconnected youth and the recognition of other government and community working groups on this emerging and high-need sector of the youth population—has opened the window of opportunity to combat youth disconnection through cohesive, evidence-driven, and cross-sector systems change.

Young people themselves are an incredibly valuable resource in this endeavor, and their input cannot be underestimated. Understanding what youth need, how they experience systems that are often designed for adult consumers and the barriers and opportunities they experience is critical to developing a system that meets their unique developmental needs.

To that end, this report highlights key findings from a recent survey and a series of focus groups with 481 youth ages 16–24 from across the District of Columbia who were at least marginally reconnected to various schools, training programs, or community based social-service organizations. This research effort was designed to better understand how, when, and why youth choose to reconnect, the barriers that prevent reconnection, and the strategies that could facilitate reconnection. Using trends identified via the survey instrument and feedback solicited in smaller focus groups, the youth voices outlined in this report emphasize that more deliberate efforts are absolutely vital in helping all young people in the District achieve lifelong success.

Drawing from this information, this report outlines six recommendations to develop a comprehensive system of services and supports that will better serve currently disconnected youth and those at greatest risk of becoming disconnected.

Drastically improve the quality and accessibility of "front door" information and services available to young people

Unbiased and straightforward information that allows young people to make informed decisions about their future is often not accessible to young people early on in their attempts to reconnect. Clear, easily accessible, and youth-friendly information detailing options for reconnection is critical to ensuring youth find and connect to the appropriate opportunity. In addition to a lack of basic information on educational or workforce options, access to necessary barrier remediation services is not well coordinated for the youth consumer. A young person's ability to access long-term wrap-around services necessary to sustain reconnection (including income or food assistance, childcare, mental and behavioral health services, and housing supports) is undermined by the complexity of the social-safety net system. The city must improve upon its current service delivery model if we want to successfully reconnect higher numbers of currently disconnected youth. Connection models that utilize the concept of a "one stop shop" (often called re-engagement or youth connection centers) have shown great promise in other jurisdictions across the country. The District should utilize the lessons learned from these approaches and develop a similar model locally.

Expand the capacity of high quality, "non-traditional" educational and training sector programs

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education is currently engaging in a "multiple pathways" study to ascertain the true capacity of the non-traditional education and training system, and the educational needs of the young people currently in it. This information must inform future investments from both the private and public sector to ensure that we are expanding capacity of the current system in the correct places. Creating appropriate programming that provides "best fit" options for young people will undoubtedly lead to higher rates of success if the options are quality ones. To the extent possible, service providers who can demonstrate previous success working with this population should endeavor to expand their capacity either at existing sites or in other parts of the city.

Improve data sharing between systems that young people disconnect from and programs currently serving disconnected youth

While many individual programs collect data about their service populations and program outcomes, there is very little population-wide data on currently disconnected youth. Functionally, this means the city does not know "who" these young people are until they successfully reconnect to a program. While some young people are referred from a K–12 setting or other program directly, many youth languish between programs. Better information on youth failing to re-connect between opportunities would significantly improve the city's capacity to execute targeted outreach while also informing the development of future program planning. Better relationships between traditional K–12 institutions

(District of Columbia Public Schools and charter schools), the State education agency (Office of the State Superintendent of Education), the city's employment agency (DC Department of Employment Services) and the current network of service providers working with the disconnected youth population must be forged and maintained. Agencies and organizations serving sub-populations of young people who are at an especially high risk of disconnection (dropouts, homeless youth, system involved youth, and pregnant and parenting young people) must also establish working relationships, and to the extent possible, data-sharing agreements with providers.

Support efforts that focus on long-term engagement and success

Young people need more than a passing intervention to truly re-engage in their long-term success. However, many of the funding streams currently supporting high numbers of formerly disconnected youth expire after one or two years. In addition, programs are also not always well connected to the next level of service provision (e.g. GED to post-secondary). These issues have serious implications for the ability of youth to receive comprehensive services over an extended period of time. The District needs more long-term funding models that encourage continued engagement in education and the labor market. Concurrently, service providers need to better connect their services to other organizations or services providers at different levels of need and intervention intensity.

Establish formal mechanisms to solicit the opinions of youth

Young people are the best source of information about themselves and their peers, yet their opinions and ideas are often overlooked in favor of outcomes data. While this is not universally true and outcomes data is certainly important to collect, youth need to be consulted regularly about what they think is working, what is not working, and what solutions/ideas they have to make the programs in which they participate better. Soliciting these opinions will make programs stronger, help stakeholders better understand and manage a dynamic consumer population, and inform what interventions are most successful and how they could be replicated to serve more young people. Funders, both public and private, should support efforts at both the organizational and agency level to collect this kind of data.

Create a comprehensive system of disconnected youth service provision

Long-term success for the District's young people hinges not just on the strengths of one program, agency, or organization, but on the ability of these entities to work together to form a comprehensive web of supports designed for young people. This web needs to meet young people where they are, both developmentally and geographically. Functionally, this means programs must work with one another to better communicate with young people, collect and share better data about the population they serve, establish a system/network of referrals and shared resources, and have the opportunity to share programmatic best practices.

Introduction

Educational attainment defines workforce success and a robust workforce drives economic stability and growth. Therefore, everyone has a stake in developing systems that promote strong education outcomes and successful transitions to the labor market: businesses and employers that aim to simultaneously build up the next generation of consumers and strengthen the future workforce; elected officials who wish to sustain the city's current prosperity and growth; parents and concerned community members who want a vibrant, healthy community; and youth themselves, who by and large want to lead stable, productive lives.

Yet, recent data shows that young people in the District face a variety of obstacles related to education and employment. In school year 2011–2012, only 61% of the city's young people graduated high school within four years[1] and 1,953 youth left school without indicating enrollment in another program or appearing on another school roster.[2] District youth have also fallen victim to the national youth employment crisis. Only 25% of 16–19 year olds and 68% of 20–24 year olds are currently working or actively seeking work.[3] Furthermore, there were an estimated 6,720 youth, who were completely disconnected from school and work in 2011.[4]

The need to better support youth in successfully completing their education and transitioning to the workforce is clear, and the opportunity to develop a smart and cohesive system is ripe. Raise DC, the District's public/private partnership dedicated to establishing cradle to career alignment, is leading the charge with its focus on youth reconnection. This—combined with the engagement of the foundation sector on the needs of disconnected youth and the recognition of other government and community working groups on this emerging and high-need sector of the youth population—has opened the window of opportunity to combat youth disconnection through cohesive, evidence-driven, and cross-sector systems change.

What this process cannot exclude however, is a more nuanced understanding of this population, their distinct and varied needs, and the direct feedback, insights, and solutions that current and formerly disconnected youth can offer.

To help facilitate an enhanced youth voice in policy making, programming, and funding decisions focused on better supporting those youth who are either already disconnected or at greatest risk, the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates (DCAYA), with support from The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region (CFNCR), undertook a survey and qualitative study of current and formerly disconnected young people. This project sought to learn more about this population, where they experienced major barriers to reconnection, as well as the types of programs or services youth believed were keys to success in reconnecting to school or work.
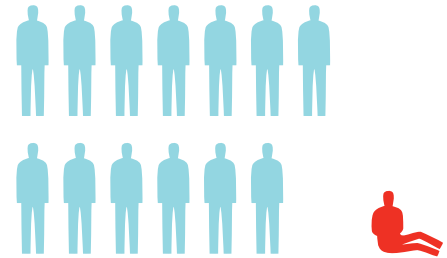

FIGURE 1. At least 6,720 young people (7% of the total population of 16–24 year olds) are neither in school nor working. These are the District of Columbia's "disconnected" youth.

The trends revealed in the survey and reinforced in focus groups revealed a number of interesting insights. We verified that, despite not always having a strong foundation of knowledge and skills, young people want to succeed and crave opportunities to improve their prospects in the future. We found that despite this will to succeed, young people do not always have or know about quality services that can help them get back on track. Lastly, we confirmed what youth service providers have known for years—that barriers to persistence and long-term success for young people come in all shapes and sizes, and that young people thrive when they are given adequate support in the form of services, programs, and relationships that meet them where they are, encourage success through sustained engagement, and actively involve them in planning their own futures.

This report begins with a brief description of the youth survey, including methodology and terminology. The second section explores relevant findings related to strengths to build on, barriers to address, and opportunities to leverage. The third section synthesizes youth input with best practice and community input to provide targeted recommendations for key stakeholders in programming, policy, and funding.

The DCAYA Survey

The young people in our sample were at least marginally connected to school, and/or a community based organization or government agency. Not all youth in the sample were completely disconnected from the labor market. However, the vast majority of those who were employed were working only part-time and reported income levels on the poverty threshold. As such, despite partial employment, the experiences of these youth can be understood as comparable to those young people in the full sample.

All of the outreach for the youth survey and focus groups was conducted through community based organizations or youth serving government agencies in the District. It should be noted that the frequency, duration, level of youth engagement, and overall quality of these connections or attachments varied widely. For example, some youth were engaged in a program, had a self-described good relationship with their teacher, tutor, or other positive adult mentor, and could actively articulate future goals and the steps needed to achieve them. Other youth merely existed within systems or programs with little to no engagement, positive takeaways, or future orientation.

Sample and Outreach

A total of 481 youth ages 16–24 completed the survey between April of 2013 and June of 2013. DCAYA partnered with its own coalition of youth service providers and members of the Raise DC Disconnected Youth Change Network to survey young people from across the city.[5] Recruitment was primarily focused on community based organizations that serve at-risk young people through the funding streams listed in Appendix A.

Following the survey, DCAYA facilitated five focus groups at Year Up, United Planning Organization, Covenant House Washington, Sasha Bruce Youthbuild, and Job Corps. The survey and focus group used for this report are samples and as such, are not representative and findings should not be generalized.

Survey Development

Existing instruments to gauge opinions and perceptions of young people were utilized and adapted in the development of the survey instrument.[6] Program staff from several community based organizations, as well as government agency partners served as reviewers for the initial survey draft and provided feedback on the survey tool to ensure that salient issues were covered and questions were constructed coherently. The survey was pre-tested with three groups of young people from various community based organizations. Special attention was given to ensure that survey questions were written in youth-friendly language and at an appropriate reading level. The survey was available in English, as well as Spanish.

Terminology

For the purposes of this report we use the term "in school" to mean a young person currently enrolled in a school/educational or training program. We use the term "out of school" to mean young people who are not connected to one of these options.

It is important to recognize that despite the fact that many of the youth were enrolled in a school or program at the time of the survey, they are often included in traditional measures of "disconnected youth" (not in school and not working). This is possible because the American Community Survey definition of "in school" only takes into account youth in high school diploma-granting institutions and post-secondary institutions. This definition of "in school" noticeably leaves out youth in GED programs, adult basic education or English as a second language programs, and job training programs that are not connected to post-secondary institutions.

Demographics

Survey respondents were roughly 50% male and 50% female. The age breakdown for youth survey participants was: 11% ages 16–17; 33% ages 18–19; 32% ages 20–21; 17% ages 22–23; and 7% age 24 (Figure 2).

Previous studies (both local and national) have found young people of color to be overrepresented in the disconnected youth population.[7] This trend was evident in DCAYA survey responses, with 79% of respondents identifying as Black /African American, 16% identifying as White, and 5% identifying as being some other race or of mixed race (Figure 3). Twenty-six percent of respondents identified as being Hispanic or Latino.

Previous studies of this population have also recognized the sharp geographic disparities that can exist within the disconnected youth population. Figure 4 shows the geographic distribution of 2011 American Community Survey (ACS) respondents that fit the definition of disconnected youth. Figure 5 shows the geographic distribution of all DCAYA survey respondents. Within the DCAYA sample zip codes, 20032 and 20019 had the highest number of respondents, which is moderately different than the ACS findings. Though communities that border the Anacostia River are well represented in both samples, and this fact certainly deserves attention, there are several neighborhoods (Shaw, Adams Morgan, Columbia Heights, and Petworth) that were not well represented in the ACS data but were reflected in the DCAYA survey. While there is no way to be 100% certain,

FIGURE 2. Respondents by Age
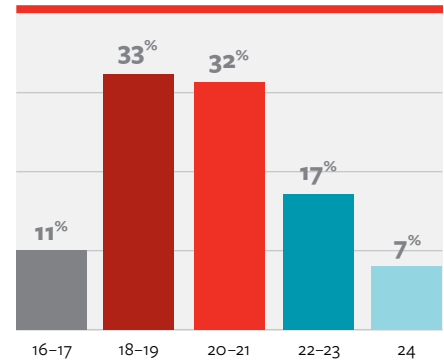
FIGURE 3. Respondents by Race
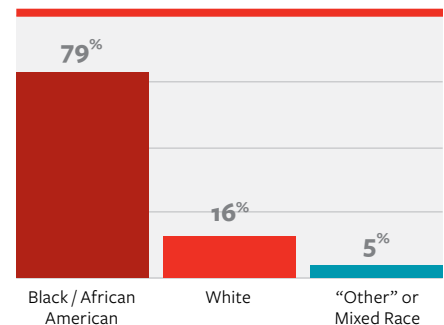
FIGURE 4. Disconnected Youth in DC by PUMA of Residence, 2011
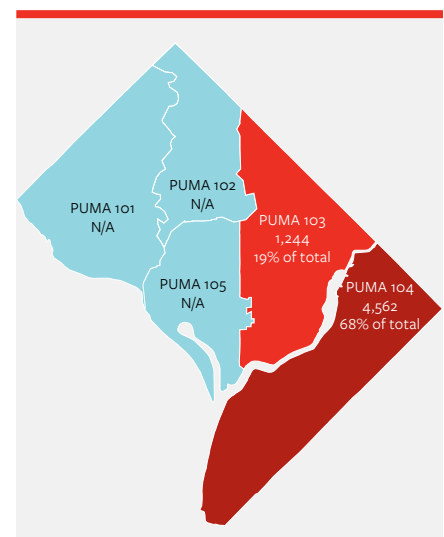
PUMA: Public Use Microdata Area. Source: Brookings analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2011 ACS 1-year estimates, microdata accessed via www.IPUMS.org. IPUMS: Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0 [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010.

FIGURE 5. Geographic Distribution of Youth Surveyed by Zip Code
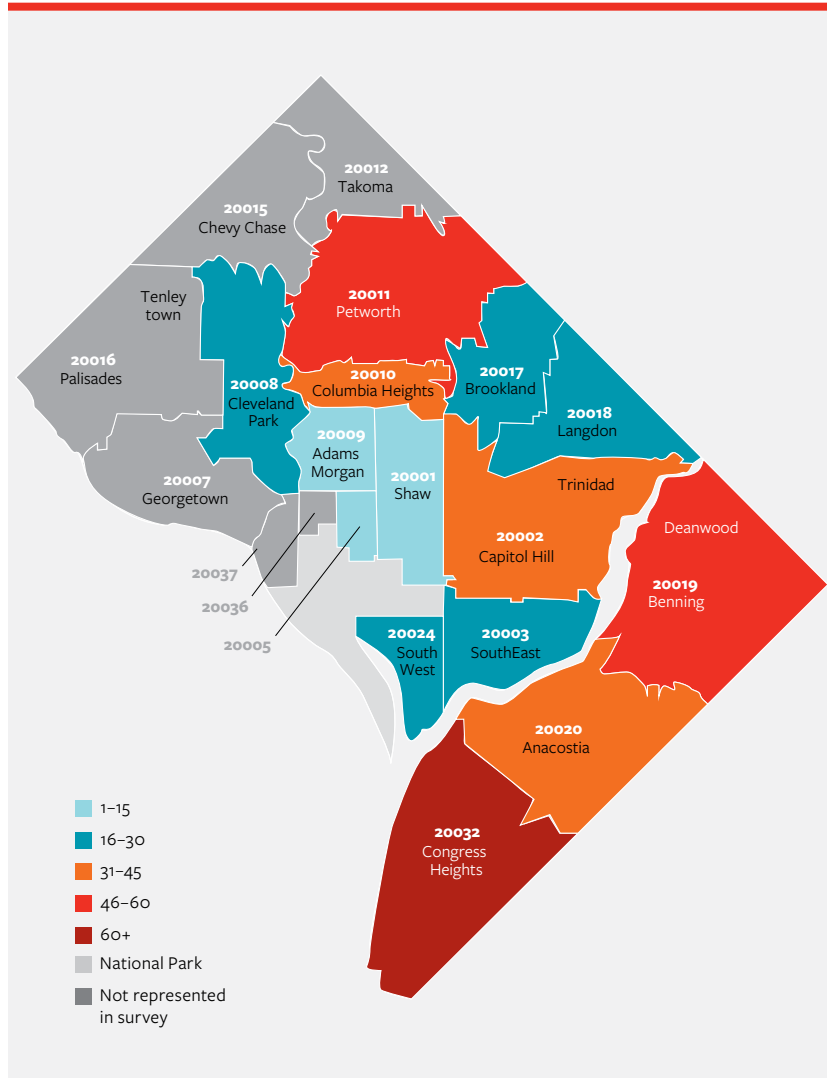
one reason for this difference may be the high number of Hispanic/Latino respondents in the DCAYA sample who reported living in zip codes 20011, 20010, and 20009. For a variety of reasons, Hispanic/Latino youth are sometimes underrepresented in traditional measures of youth disconnection. This could account for some of the differences between the DCAYA sample and the ACS sample.

Educational Levels of DCAYA Survey Participants

Historically, the District has struggled to prepare high numbers of students for the rigors of post-secondary education, training, or the labor market. This reality has created three groups of young people who are disconnected from educational options—each with their own level of need.

The first group lacks any high school credential (diploma, GED, or equivalent). Within this first group are numerous educational functioning levels, ranging from those who lack basic literacy/numeracy skills to those capable of passing the GED (see Figure 6). Roughly 53% of all survey respondents fall into this first group, as they currently lacked a high school diploma or equivalent (see Figure 7). For students over age 18, 47% of respondents had not yet obtained a high school diploma or equivalent (most students do not graduate high school before ages 17–18). It is currently estimated that roughly 2,700 of the District's disconnected youth fall within this category.[8] Also included in this sub-group are young people who require English language services. Many of the Hispanic/Latino young people in the DCAYA survey sample fall into this group. This is important to note because sub-groups like the Hispanic/Latino population, with large numbers of non-native English speakers, have even more distinct needs. They may be in need of educational services (at any level), English language services, or both concurrently. This additional level of need has implications for program structure and delivery.

The second group of young people who have become disconnected from educational options have obtained a diploma or GED but have not achieved stable, year-round success in the labor market. The economic value of these young people achieving a secondary credential is undeniable. However, the labor market of the Washington, DC region is one of the most competitive in the nation. While 24% of respondents over 18 had attained a high school diploma and 19% had gotten their GED, without post-secondary coursework or training they will continue to struggle to achieve economic stability throughout their adult lives. It is currently estimated that roughly 4,000 of the District's disconnected youth fall within this category.[9]

The third major group includes young people who have managed to access post-secondary training or courses, but not completed a degree or program. It also includes those who have completed a degree or program, but have not found labor market success. Seven percent of survey respondents had some college experience but no degree or certificate and less than 2% had a certificate or an associate's degree.

Understanding the unique educational needs of these sub-groups is central to solving the issue of youth disconnection in that young people will require different interventions at various points along this continuum. Functionally, this means a wealth of program models and options must exist to support youth at various ages, developmental stages, and educational functioning levels.

Young People In Need of Extensive and Specialized Services
Within these three major groups, there are several sub-groups of young people who are at an especially high risk of long-term labor market disconnection.[10] These are broadly understood to be: those who have left high school without a credential; pregnant/parenting youth; youth involved in the juvenile justice system; and youth involved in the child welfare system. These groups were well represented in the DCAYA sample.

Thirty-three percent of respondents reported that they had voluntarily dropped out of school or an educational program in the past and 21% of respondents reported that they had been expelled from a school or educational program in the past. These youth require access to the range of services detailed in the above section on educational attainment.

FIGURE 6. Educational Levels of Students

Beginning Literacy	Literacy/numeracy skills at an equivalency of Grade 2 and under
Beginning Basic	Literacy/numeracy skills higher than Grade 2, but lower than Grade 4
Low Intermediate Basic	Literacy/numeracy skills higher than Grade 4, but lower than Grade 6
High Intermediate Basic	Literacy/numeracy skills higher than Grade 6, but lower than Grade 9
Low Secondary Basic	Literacy/numeracy skills higher than Grade 9, but lower than Grade 11
High Secondary Basic	Literacy/numeracy skills higher than Grade 11, but lower than 12, they have not attained a secondary credential (GED, NEDP, Diploma)
Secondary Credential Completion	Obtained a GED or diploma, they may or may not be fully prepared for post-secondary coursework/training or entry into the labor market
Post Secondary Completion	Obtained a post-secondary degree, credential or advanced training that prepares them for entry into the labor market

FIGURE 7. Educational Attainment of All Respondents

- Some high school — 53%
- High school diploma — 21%
- GED — 17%
- Some college — 7%
- College certificate — 1%
- Associates degree — >1%
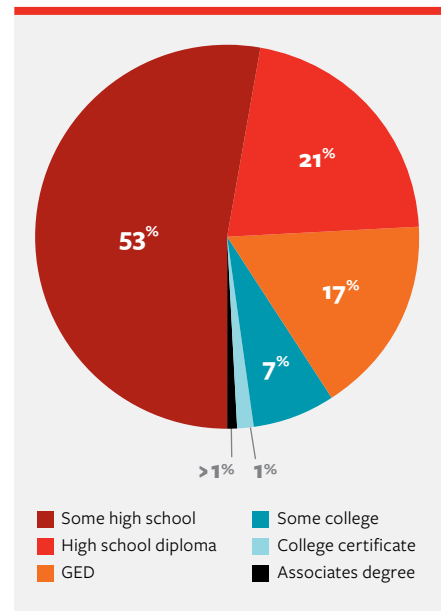
In addition to young people who have exited high school without a diploma or credential, 32% of respondents reported that they were currently pregnant or parenting. Of those youth who were pregnant or parents, 71% had one child, 21% had two children, 8% had three children, and less than 1% had four or more children. Forty percent of all female respondents indicated that they were pregnant or parenting.

Nineteen percent of respondents reported that they had ever been on probation or committed to the Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services (DYRS), the District's juvenile justice agency. Sixteen percent of respondents indicated that they were currently or had in the past been involved in the child welfare system. Youth transitioning out of these "systems of care" are at a well-documented extreme risk of not making a positive transition into adulthood.

Traditional employment and educational programming is not sufficient for these very high-risk populations. Youth involved in the juvenile justice system or in foster care require sustained, high-quality programming that effectively integrates high-quality services based in systems of care (case management, education, counseling, and mentoring) with other complementary educational and employment programming. Serving pregnant and parenting youth requires the same level of service coordination. However, their needs must be taken into account in tandem with their dependents, who are at a high-risk of becoming the next generation of disconnected youth. Lastly, high school dropouts, much like the larger disconnected youth population, are not a homogenous group. Young people drop out of high school for a variety of reasons, ranging from learning/physical disabilities to behavioral issues to outside factors like needing to support a family (both custodial children and other family members). This reality makes it imperative that barriers to educational/labor market success are identified and addressed early on by entities serving this population.

A final but less understood sub-group of youth who are at an elevated risk for disconnection and in need of additional supports is the foreign-born young people of Washington, DC. Though we do not know the exact number of young people in our sample who were foreign-born as opposed to native-born, the region has a growing number of foreign-born adolescents and young adults.[11] This sub-population of young people are three times more likely to lack a high school diploma or equivalent by age 24 than their native-born peers.[12] Additionally, foreign-born youth who are employed may not be that much better off than their unemployed peers. If employed, foreign-born youth are more likely to remain in low-wage positions throughout the duration of their working lives.[13] These young people require services and support that take into account the cultural competencies necessary for long-term success.

It is of the utmost importance that there are ample supports catered to the unique needs of all of the above mentioned sub-groups so that they can achieve long-term success.

Key Findings

A few main themes emerged via the survey responses and were further supported by focus group data.

Strengths

Young People Have High Hopes for the Future

Many survey respondents reported having high aspirations for the future. Sixty-four percent of in school youth reported that within the six months of finishing their school or program they planned to find a job or a new job; 46% reported they wanted to enroll in college and 28% reported they wanted to get more training specific to a job they wanted (Figure 8). For students not currently enrolled in a school/program, the highest percentage of young people wished to find employment opportunities, and others were making plans to complete educational milestones (Figure 9). Young people have an optimistic vision for their future, and that is an asset that cannot be discounted.

Young People Do Recognize the Importance of a Secondary Education

Nearly 37% of in school and nearly 30% of out of school survey respondents had formerly dropped out of high school or another educational program (Figure 10). About 22% of in school youth had been expelled versus about 28% of out of school youth. However, out of school youth did report suspensions in much higher numbers.[14] We do not know how many times or for what offense these young people were suspended or expelled. One could regard these figures as evidence that young people do not value education. However, when compared to the data on efforts to reconnect that emerged in both the survey and the focus groups, this information actually tells a very different story. Youth fail to thrive in a traditional K–12 setting for a variety of reasons, but the vast majority has not given up on obtaining a secondary education—they just need alternatives to a traditional high school experience.

These findings were particularly apparent in the focus group conversations. Youth participants had an acute awareness of the current struggles young people face with regard to education and how that affected their long-term prospects in the labor market.[15] Focus group participants also spoke at length about their and their peers' experiences with dropping out of high school and highlighted that often "dropping out" did not seem like a choice they had consciously made because they did not recognize the value of education but rather the culmination of a string of negative experiences with school. Once students had left high school, the GED proved a popular option for re-engaging in education.

While DCAYA did not ask questions about why students appreciated the GED specifically, many in school youth (36%) specifically identified a desire and need to obtain a GED to be successful in life. As one focus group respondent put it, "You need a GED to get a job, any job." Focus group respondents reported that the GED was an attractive option for many youth because it is "quicker than the diploma process" and "gave students a second chance."

Although the role of the GED in providing positive options for young people cannot be denied, it should be noted that we do not know to what extent young people value the GED specifically because it is a quality option or because it is currently one of the only options available to them. The bulk of programs that

FIGURE 8. Six-month Plans After Finishing Current School or Program

Find a job	Get more training specific to a job	Find a different program for training	Enroll in college	Not sure
64%	21%	9%	46%	6%
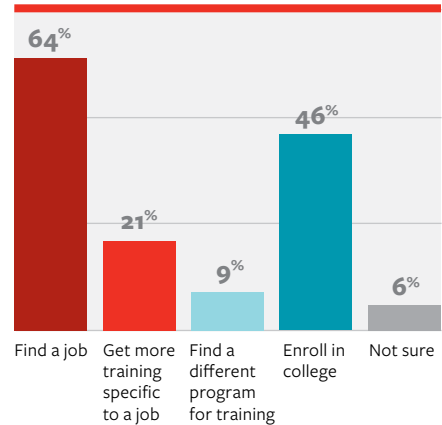
FIGURE 9. Six-month Plans for Out-of-School Youth

Find a job or a new job	Enter a job training program	Get a diploma or GED	Enroll or re-enroll in college	Not sure
69%	34%	21%	33%	17%
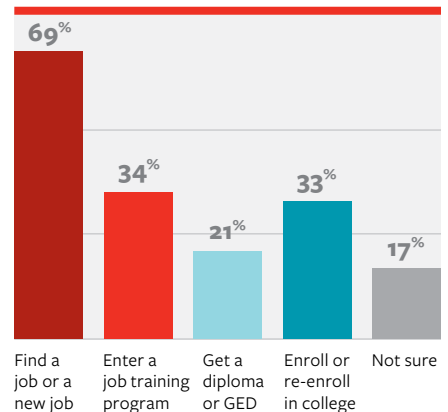
FIGURE 10. Drop-outs, Suspensions and Expulsions

■ In school ■ Out of School

	Voluntarily dropped out	Been suspended	Been expelled
In school	37%	42%	22%
Out of School	30%	55%	28%
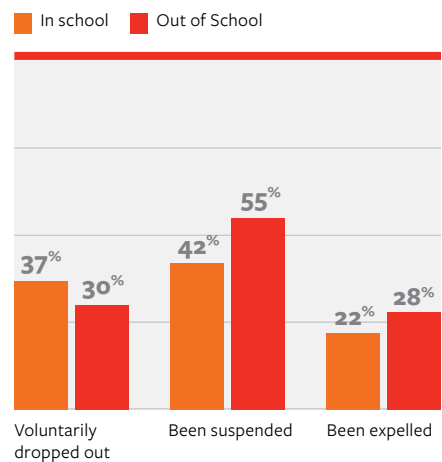
offer educational re-engagement or "second chance" options in the District offer GED preparation services, not credits toward a diploma.[16] Students in schools or programs who are "overage and under credited" have few options for completing a high school credential before age 21, at which point they "age out" of traditional schools. Furthermore, many young people who have dropped out do not wish to return to a traditional high school setting. Many focus group respondents told facilitators that they liked going to a small school "where they knew everyone" as opposed to their experience at a larger high school.

Young People Appreciate Opportunities to Re-Engage in Educational Options at Any Age

Nationwide, most high school dropouts will attempt to reconnect to educational options within eight years of dropping out.[17] However, in the District, young people are seeking to reconnect far before the national eight year threshold. For instance, 32% of young people who were currently reconnected to a school, educational, or training program were only 18–19 years of age and roughly 30% were 20–21 years of age. Sixty percent of out of school youth aged 16–24 were curre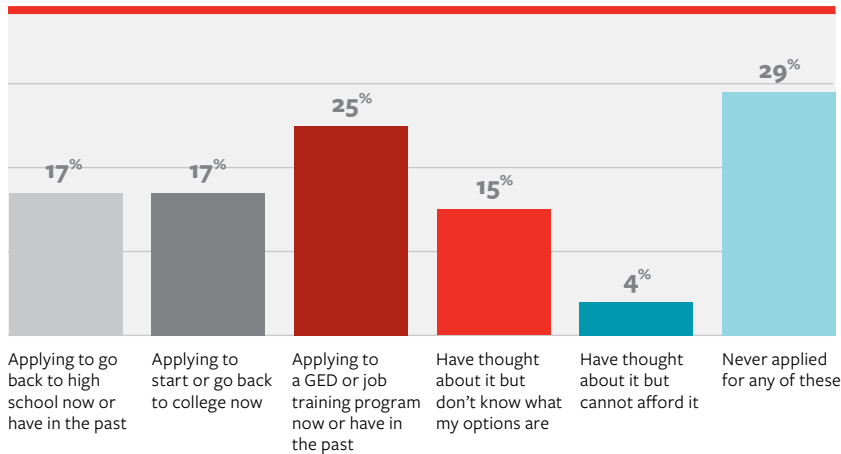ntly seeking ways to re-engage in education, or had in the past, and some reported dedicating time daily to "studying or trying to get back to school" (see Figure 11 and Figure 17).

These numbers suggest that young people will take advantage of programs that exist at a variety of ages and not just "later in life." While we do not know about young people's abilities to persist and succeed in educational programs, the notion that they want to be engaged in positive activities is something that should not be ignored. This finding also has significance for policy and programming. Youth who are seeking to reconnect at younger ages are often doing so through an adult system that is ill-equipped to work with a higher-need and less-skilled consumer. Modifying these systems to work more effectively for younger participants will be key to their success.

It should be noted that 16–17 year-olds represented a relatively small percentage of survey respondents (Figure 2), likely due to the fact that this age bracket may still be marginally connected to a traditional high school. DCAYA did not execute the youth survey in traditional DC Public Schools or traditional DC Public Charter

FIGURE 11. Out of School Youth Re-Engagement Status

Applying to go back to high school now or have in the past	Applying to start or go back to college now	Applying to a GED or job training program now or have in the past	Have thought about it but don't know what my options are	Have thought about it but cannot afford it	Never applied for any of these
17%	17%	25%	15%	4%	29%

Schools. It is important to note that even though this younger population of youth may be enrolled in a high school, the District's citywide attendance rates foreshadow serious issues. Truancy is often a late stage indicator of dropout and in some of these students' minds, simply not going to school equates with dropping out.[18] Lags in the processing of formal exit paperwork by schools may be masking a number of young people who, in their own view, are already disconnected.
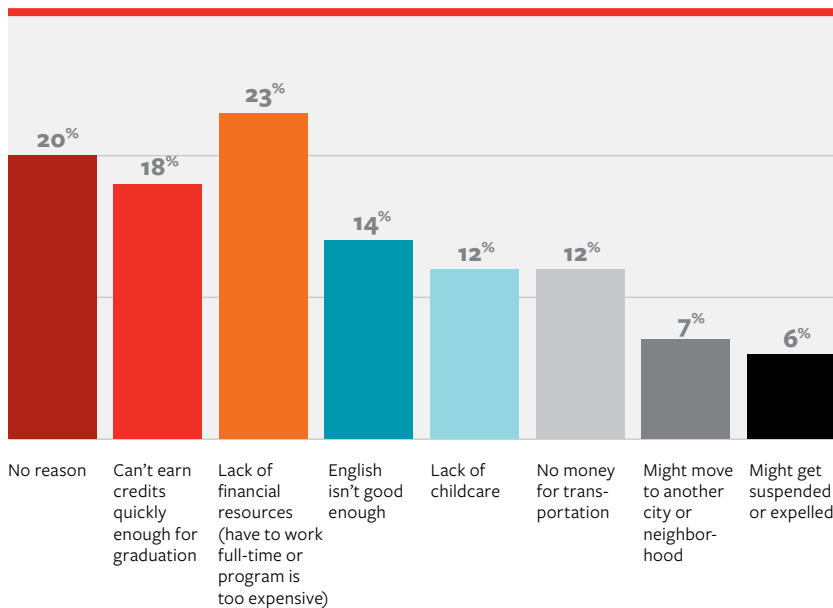
Barriers

Barriers Specific to Educational Persistence and Success

The barriers young people face to completing their educations can be overwhelming. This is true in both the traditional K–12 space and in the non-traditional/alternative education space. Most students who experience academic failure in traditional high schools do not magically overcome the challenges and barriers to completion (behavioral health issues, learning disabilities, etc.) they faced previously—these issues can remain pervasive in later academic endeavors. Furthermore, barriers to completing an educational program often compound as youth advance in age. This is especially true as young people become parents themselves or become responsible for younger siblings, parents, or other family members. In addition, as youth age, the need to work and earn money becomes increasingly acute and can serve as a significant barrier to educational goals.

When we asked the question "Can you think of any reasons you may not earn a diploma or get a degree at your current school/program?" survey respondents offered some interesting insights. Twenty percent of respondents reported that there was no reason they could think of they would not finish their current school/program. Of those who thought there might be some reasons they might not finish their current school/program (youth were instructed to check all that apply), 18% reported that

FIGURE 12. Reasons For Not Earning a Diploma or Degree at Current Program

they may not be able to earn credits quickly enough for graduation, 23% said that the need to work full-time or the cost of the program could be a barrier to completion, 14% of respondents were concerned their English language skills may not be good enough to earn a degree, 12% identified that a lack of childcare could serve as a barrier, and 12% identified that they could not always afford to get to school/class.

These findings were reinforced in the DCAYA focus group sessions. Many youth responded to questions about why they might not complete a program with concerns about the cost of living (housing, transportation, childcare), the opportunity costs associated with passing up work to finish a program, and the utility of finishing a program if they could find work through their own devices or absent higher levels of education. Interestingly, one issue raised in the focus groups and not reflected on the survey was youth concern over drug testing and whether a negative result from a drug test could bump a youth from a program. Youth were split over whether drug testing for programs was a negative or a positive occurrence. However, a number (12%) of survey respondents did report that drugs were one of the biggest challenges facing young people in the District. Seven percent highlighted that becoming involved with the juvenile or adult criminal system (which could also be a function of drug use) was a serious challenge for young people to overcome.

The DCAYA survey asked questions specifically about transportation, as it has been a consistent concern among providers that work with at-risk youth. Students use a variety of transportation options in getting to school/programs (bus, metro, car, foot), and as a result there was variability to the costs associated with transportation. Nonetheless, nearly one-third (29%) of students reported spending more than $30 a week or $120 a month getting to and from school. Equally concerning, 47% of survey respondents who spent more than $30 a week came from Wards 5, 7, or 8. While young people who are connected to a traditional K–12 school are eligible for some transportation subsidies from the DC Government, these subsidies do not extend to young people older than age 22 or those who take classes outside of the traditional school calendar.[19] Given the low earning power for many students, and the level of participation in non-traditional programs, the reality is that transportation costs may be a prohibitive factor in a student's ability to re-connect.

Barriers Specific to Employment Success

The DCAYA survey asked youth what they thought their largest barriers to employment were: 43% reported that they did not have enough work experience for the job they wanted, 33% reported that they did not have enough education for the job they wanted, and 31% reported that there were no jobs available where they lived. Twenty-one percent of youth did report that not having transportation to and from work served as a barrier to finding employment.[20] The fact that 43% of respondents reported not having enough work experience for the job they want is perhaps not surprising, given the percentage of respondents who reported having very little formal and informal work experience.

Eighteen percent of respondents reported never having been employed. Even of those who had obtained a period of employment, few had substantive labor market experience. When asked, "What is the longest amount of time you have been employed at a single job?" 51% of respondents answered "less than six months." An additional 16% answered "less than one year." A level of churn is to be expected in the youth labor market; however, it should be an important goal of those concerned about the long-term trajectories of young people that young people have ample work experience by the time they reach age 25.

FIGURE 13. Largest Obstacles to Finding Employment
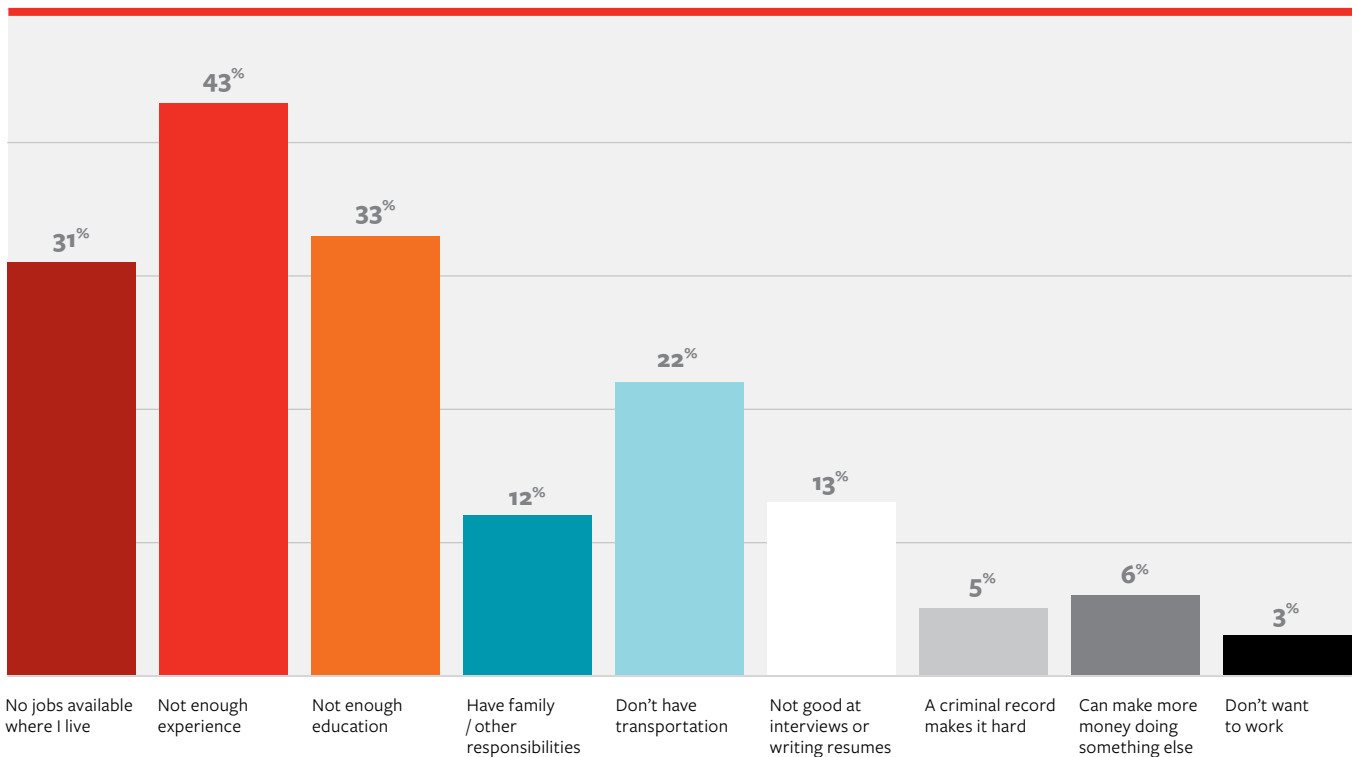
When we asked youth about their more informal work experiences, the results were slightly more encouraging. Forty-six percent of respondents had engaged in activities such as baby-sitting, yard-work, or paid chores; 45% reported that they had participated in the District's Summer Youth Employment Program; 42% reported performing volunteer work that was not part of a requirement for high school graduation; and 39% reported receiving a stipend for attending a program.[21] In addition, 19% of respondents reported taking part in a paid internship experience and 15% of respondents reported that they had taken part in an unpaid internship.[22]

Additional Barriers to Reconnection

Housing

DCAYA also asked questions about housing, recognizing that homelessness, housing transience, and the high cost of living are pervasive and well documented issues in the District of Columbia.[23]

Encouragingly, 58% of respondents reported that they had not moved in the past year and 67% reported that they were currently living with one or both parents, or other family members. Given the low income rates among participants, the decision to stay in a family home is logical and is in fact in line with national trends for young adults.[24]

Twenty-four percent of survey respondents reported that they had moved once in the past year, which may or may not be a sign of housing instability. What is disturbing, however, is that nearly 25% of respondents were unstably housed, meaning they had moved more than twice in the last year or were currently living in a shelter or transitional living program. Housing issues can serve as both a cause and effect of youth disconnection from school and work, and the effect of housing instability should be considered a major issue affecting disconnected young people.

Poverty Status

An estimated 34% (20,000) of the entire population of 18–24 year olds in the District are currently living below the federal poverty level.[25] The findings revealed in the DC sample reveal just how far below the poverty threshold this population is living: 56% of respondents reported making less than $5,000 a year and 7% reported earning between $5,000–$10,000 a year. This extreme level of poverty is especially concerning when taken in concert with the findings of previous studies showing that despite high poverty levels, relatively few individuals within the disconnected youth population are accessing public safety net programs like food stamps, income assistance, or support for childcare.[26] A final and key finding in the sample was that roughly 29% of respondents answered that they weren't sure how much money they earned in 2012. This finding has serious implications for young people's level of financial literacy and ability to be self-sufficient. Twenty-five percent of survey respondents reported that in the past year their income was between $0 and $500. Twelve percent of respondents reported making between $500 and $1,000; 19% of respondents reported making between $1,000 and $5,000; and 7% reported making between $5,000 and $10,000 (Figure 14).

FIGURE 14. Reported Income

$0–$500

$500–$1,000

$1,000–$5,000

$5,000–$10,000

Over $10,000

Unsure of their income
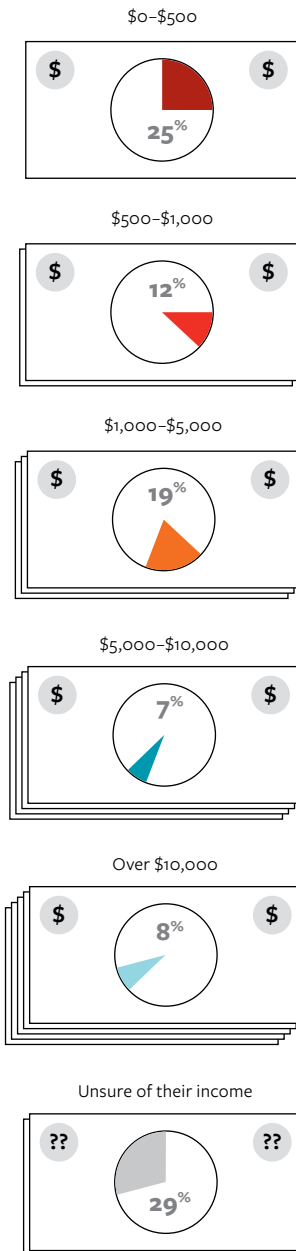
Opportunities

Word of Mouth is a Powerful Motivator for Young People

When we asked in school youth what informational resources they had used to reconnect with programs and what about their current program had made them want to enroll, some trends emerged that should inform how stakeholders communicate with young people who are seeking to re-engage. Thirty-eight percent of in school youth reported they found out about their current school or program from a family member or older friend and an additional 16% reported finding their program from a friend their age. With over 50% of survey respondents reporting that they found their current program via known sources and word of mouth proved to be a powerful and motivating source of information. Focus group respondents verified that knowing a peer, family member, or another person who went through a program and found success was a motivating force in their decision to enroll.

Guidance counselors, case managers, and teachers were also important sources of information, with 21% of youth reporting that they found their current program through such sources. Youth who were currently or previously involved with the juvenile justice system (36%) and youth who were currently or previously in foster care (39%) reported that resources available through their system of care had introduced them to their current program. Forty-five percent of youth currently living in a shelter or transitional living program reported that these facilities and staff had proved to be helpful in finding an educational/training program.

Only 10% of youth reported they heard about their program through some form of advertising (internet, print, or radio). While this could be due to programs' lack of advertising, it might also be the effect of programs' utilizing poor channels of advertising for a youth audience. When we asked focus groups about what advertising methods they thought would be effective means of reaching other young people, most respondents said that advertising on bus routes or on the metro would be an effective way of getting the word out. Young people also reported that while the internet (e.g., Google search) did provide them with some information about programs, often it was difficult to get reliable or recent information about a

**FIGURE 15.** Sources of Information About Schools or Programs
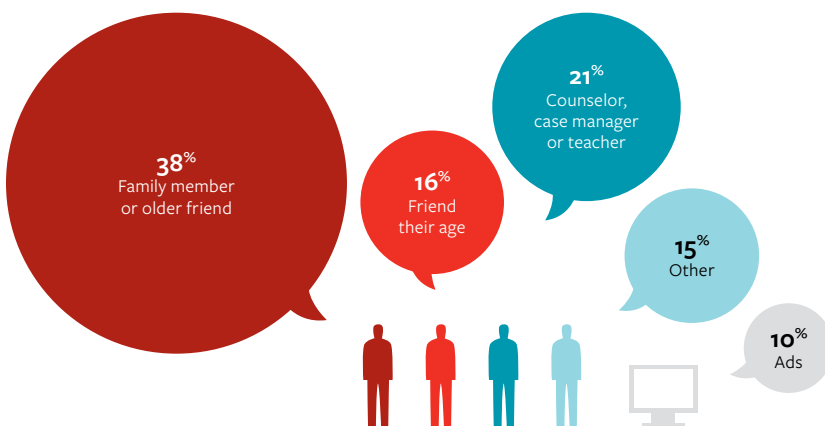
program option. Specifically, young people reported that though they could find websites for some programs, there was often little information about the enroll-ment process or what they could expect of the program if they did enroll. Youth also reported that social media was not especially helpful as a means of outreach to specific programs because youth only followed the social media (Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram) of an organization once they were already connected to it. As one focus group respondent noted "I don't want people from school up in my personal business, they don't need to see who I'm with or what I do when I'm not here."

When searching for employment opportunities, youth did report relying on word of mouth and personal networks. However, there was a higher utilization of web-based platforms when searching for employment vs. educational options. When asked specific resources utilized when looking for jobs, a high number responded using websites like Monster, Craigslist, or Indeed. Approximately 31% of survey respondents reported seeking out employment options using signs or fliers that businesses display; 11% of youth respondents reported using the District's American Job Centers or "One Stops" under the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) as a resource when job hunting; and 30% reported utilizing the District's locally funded Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP).

Survey respondents' reliance on information that came from known and trusted sources has major implications for how programs and agencies seeking to aid young people should be conducting outreach. Given that a very low number (13%) of respondents were entirely disengaged from school or employment, we utilized the focus groups to speak with young people about their peers who were not connected to positive programs or supports. It is important to note that youth were asked if they had peers who were not in school, working, or involved in a positive activity, and most of the focus group participants reported knowing multiple peers who met those conditions. By and large, focus group participants stated that peers remain disconnected from educational programs or the labor market because either they didn't know about the range of available programs or there were not enough programs. In either instance, this speaks to the need to more closely examine and modify how youth are made aware of educational or job training opportunities to ensure it is accessible to the youth consumer.

FIGURE 16. Resources Used When Looking For a Job
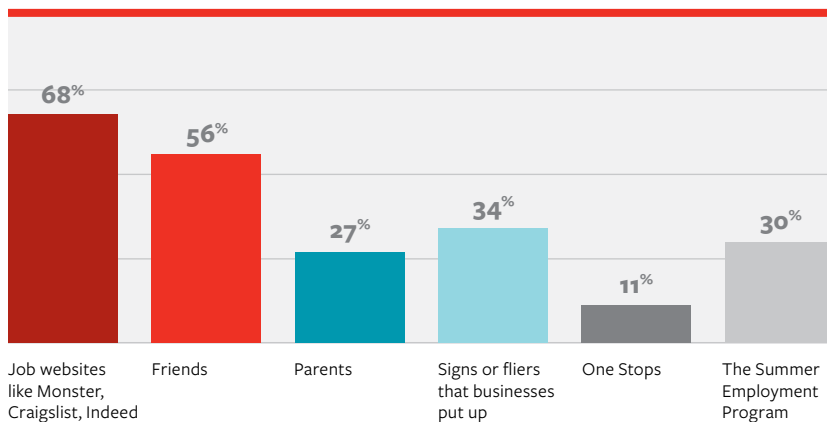
Young People Value Programs and Services That Provide "Real World" Experiences and Access to Caring Adults
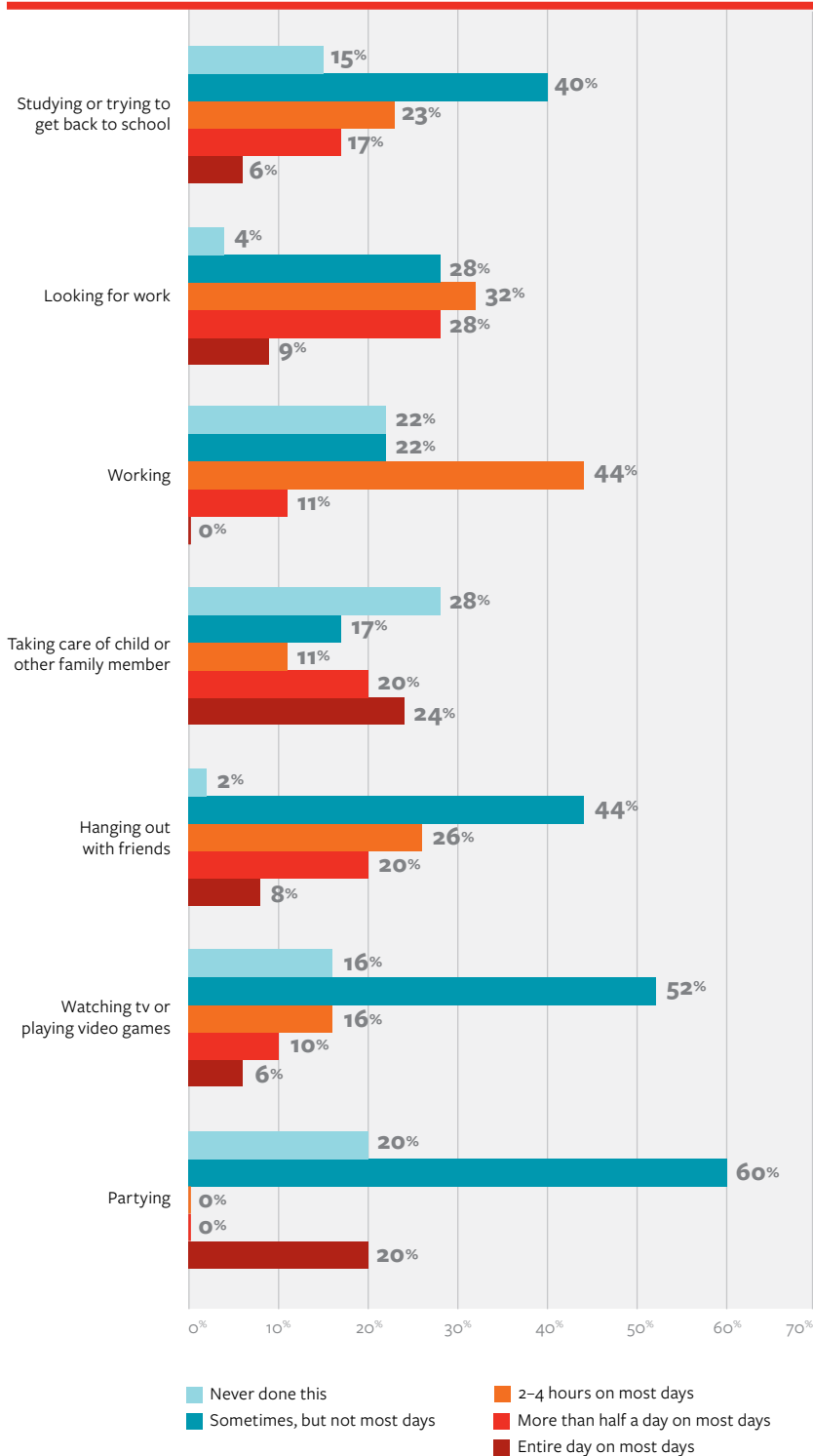
Programs that offer low- or no-cost job training services and non-academic credentials with value in the labor market (customer service, information technology, etc.) are critical resources for young people. When in school youth were asked whether or not they would recommend their current school or program to another student who might have similar goals, 90% of respondents reported that they would recommend their program. While some students answered the question broadly (22% responded that their program would somehow help them in the future or help them achieve their goals and 15% responded that their programs provided good opportunities or ways to get back on track), others described specific programmatic elements that they liked about their school or program. Most notably, 42% of students who cited that their program would somehow help them in the future noted specific employment, training, or work readiness elements of the programs as the basis for their belief that this program would help them and as reasons for recommending the program. An additional 19% cited being provided with meaningful/engaging content.

When we asked youth why they chose to enroll in their current program, 58% of survey respondents reported that they "heard good things about the school or program." Within that sub-group of respondents, 23% of youth reported that they chose to enroll in their school/program because it "trains people for the kind of job I want" and an additional 9% reported simply wanting/needing to attain their GED. Focus group respondents reinforced these findings and reported that learning a trade and/or better preparing themselves for the world of work was a motivating factor in their decision to enroll in a school/program. Many focus group respondents also noted that getting "real world experience" while enrolled in a program was especially important to them. These real world experiences ranged from meetings or opportunities to ask questions of professionals from career fields they were interested in to short-term job shadowing experiences to longer term internship positions in a chosen field. Young people also wanted opportunities to create and vet their resumes.

The high value young people placed on real world experiences and employability skills is likely reflective of another finding from the sample—most young people want to work. Of survey respondents that were not currently working, 83% reported that they were "looking for work." We do not know the extent to which in school youth were actively seeking out employment (daily/weekly job hunts, submitting resumes to employers, etc.), however a number of out of school youth reported that they dedicated time daily to searching for work (see Figure 17).

In addition to highly valuing programs that could help make them competitive in the labor market, young people also cited a number of other reasons for reporting that they would recommend their program to a peer. Eighteen percent cited the presence of caring and reliable adult like teachers or staff; 19% cited being provided with meaningful/engaging content; 4% cited the ability to have a flexible/accelerated academic schedule; 8% reported that having a safe and welcoming environment in which to learn was important; and 6% cited being able to access non-educational support services. Other reasons cited in lower numbers included accessing language services, small class sizes, and help with childcare.

FIGURE 17. Activities By Amount Of Time Spent Doing Them

Studying or trying to get back to school
- 15%
- 40%
- 23%
- 17%
- 6%

Looking for work
- 4%
- 28%
- 32%
- 28%
- 9%

Working
- 22%
- 22%
- 44%
- 11%
- 0%

Taking care of child or other family member
- 28%
- 17%
- 11%
- 20%
- 24%

Hanging out with friends
- 2%
- 44%
- 26%
- 20%
- 8%

Watching tv or playing video games
- 16%
- 52%
- 16%
- 10%
- 6%

Partying
- 20%
- 60%
- 0%
- 0%
- 20%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70%

Legend:
- Never done this
- Sometimes, but not most days
- 2–4 hours on most days
- More than half a day on most days
- Entire day on most days

Focus group respondents also highlighted that positive adult relationships and the presence of good role models was especially important to them when it came to persisting in a program. When youth were asked why they chose to stay with a program and what programmatic elements they liked best, most responded with personal stories about how teachers/organizational staff cared about them, made them feel welcome and were invested in the success of young people. Others noted that staff, even if they sometimes came across as unfriendly, genuinely cared about their futures. For many young people this was the first time they felt adequately supported in an educational environment. As one young person noted, "The teachers here actually care, and it makes me want to do better." Another focus group participant offered up, "My family was not there for me, so the teachers here became my new family." Positive connections with adult role models and social networks have long been cited as one of the key elements to young people's positive transition into adulthood and these practices should continue to be utilized.[27]

Programs and Service Providers Need to Be Upfront About Expectations and Reliable in Their Service Delivery

Though focus group respondents highlighted their appreciation for quality teachers and staff once enrolled in a program, many young people had negative impressions about some of the people and processes they encountered when attempting to connect with a program or while in a program. Focus group respondents spoke at length about issues they had when first interacting with a program during outreach and recruitment phases. Young people did not necessarily have personal issues with the individuals conducting outreach, however they did highlight that they would be more likely to listen to someone who came from their neighborhood. This finding only further reinforces the aforementioned point about young people utilizing trusted sources of information.

Young people's issues with the outreach staff focused mainly on the feeling that outreach staff failed to provide good "upfront" or "useful" information about programs. Many young people stated that while they eventually liked the program, they did not have a good understanding of what they were "getting themselves into." Other respondents highlighted that there were not many options to "test out" programs, meaning youth did not always have a clear sense of the differences between the various programs they were applying to. Additionally, youth reported that some programs would tell you what you could get (GED, training, degree, etc.), but did not do a good job explaining the path to a credential from beginning to end.

Young people also had particular issues with the amount of enrollment paperwork, orientations, and testing they had to go through in the early stages of a program. One youth remarked, "They had us running around town asking people for all sorts of stuff just to get in here." Some focus group participants did seem to understand why information had to be collected, but many youth were frustrated by the process.

Other issues young people reported having while in a program were not getting paid (usually a stipend) on time or dealing with "unprofessional" staff. Ten percent of survey respondents said they would not recommend their program to a peer. While this is a relatively small percentage, the explanations behind why young people reported they would not recommend their program were based almost

exclusively on interactions with programs that young people felt were "disorganized" or "unhelpful." Focus group respondents reiterated this finding. As one young person put it, "If I didn't think they were going to help me out with being productive, why would I come out here every day?" On the issue of not receiving a stipend on time, young people impressively seemed to be understanding about the reason this had occurred, but reported in high numbers that this affected their ability to get to their program every day. In light of the transportation expenses youth reported, this is not surprising.
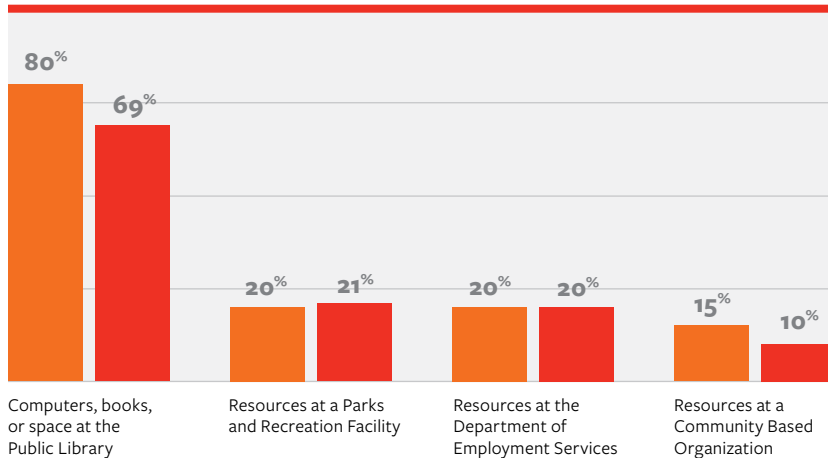
Reaching Out to Young People May Not Be As Hard as We Think

Clearly better communicating with the population of young people who need services and supports should be a high priority for all youth stakeholders in the District. Reaching young people where they live or commonly congregate is of critical importance to achieving this goal. With that in mind, the DCAYA survey also asked young people questions about which community resources youth currently utilize in an effort to understand where outreach activities could have the greatest impact (see Figure 18).

Both in school and out of school survey respondents reported in high percentages that they utilize the city's libraries (80% and 69%, respectively). However we do not know the frequency with which youth utilize library facilities and services or which specific sites they utilize. Youth also reported in somewhat lower numbers that they utilize the District's parks and recreation facilities (DPR), the Department of Employment Services (DOES), or the resources of a community based organization.

The 11% of respondents who reported using the District's American Job Centers ("One Stops") and 30% who reported utilizing SYEP as a resource when job hunting does suggest that existing city resources could be further utilized as hub sites for programs to recruit potential participants. While the District's One Stops are limited to young people over the age of 18 by federal law, SYEP serves a large percentage of the District's 14–21 year old population.[28] As such, it represents a key point of contact by which educational or employment training programs could recruit youth as well as a logical opportunity for DOES staff to provide youth with a direct referral to year-round programming.

FIGURE 18. Community Resources Utilized By Youth   ■ In school   ■ Out of School

| | Computers, books, or space at the Public Library | Resources at a Parks and Recreation Facility | Resources at the Department of Employment Services | Resources at a Community Based Organization |

Recommendations

In the last section of this report, we provide recommendations for action by two major stakeholder groups. The first stakeholder group consists of entities that deal directly with young people—youth focused government agencies, community based organizations, and schools. The second set of recommendations is targeted at those who control funding—policy makers and elected officials who have direct oversight of government agencies, local funding streams, and policies that guide the use of these funds. Private and corporate philanthropy is also included in this group to the extent that outside funding can address these issues. There may be significant overlap between the two groups, and thus we encourage stakeholders to collaborate closely to form a comprehensive system able to leverage the opportunities and resolve the barriers to success faced by young people.

These recommendations are specific to providing more meaningful services and supports to the population of young people who are currently disconnected, those who are extremely likely to become disconnected, and those young people who may only be marginally connected to a school or the labor market at this point in time. Prevention efforts to shut off the supply of disconnected youth must be further explored and undertaken by the same stakeholder groups (and other partners) we target with this brief. However, recommendations pertaining specifically to prevention are outside the scope of this report.

For Youth Serving Agencies, Organizations, and Schools:

Improve Communications About Low-Cost/Free Education and Training Options for Young People

It's clear that while many young people are connecting to educational and training options, there are still a number of young people who are not, and their prospects for labor market success absent higher levels of education are grim. While the outreach of programs and schools cannot always provide the motivating force that drives young people to enroll, improving access to key program information is nonetheless necessary.

Information about program options should be as descriptive as possible, enrollment information needs to be up to date, and there should be more than one person on staff who can speak with youth directly if they have questions. More options that allow young people to discover what enrolling in a program might be like on a day-to-day basis should also be explored. While individual programs and schools can certainly take a critical look at their existing outreach and communications efforts, there is also a need to centralize information about young people's options. Youth need to understand the diversity of programs available to them.

They need to be able to judge the appropriateness of a program/school for their unique level of skills/expertise and personal goals, and they need the opportunity to talk about their choices with a trusted individual. Being able to compare programs side by side via a centralized mechanism would encourage thoughtful exploration and informed decision making that does not require a youth to visit multiple locations to understand the options available. To that end, programs and agencies need to better coordinate with one another to ensure youth have simple, up-to-date, and consistent access to the information they need to put them on a path towards success.

Intentionally Build More Long-Term and Caring Relationships With and Among Young People

Young people, especially those who have experienced limited success in academic settings or in the labor market, are making important decisions based on their existing relationships. This reality makes it critical young people possess good social networks from which to draw, including caring and trusted adult role models that they can rely on. Early demonstrations of programs that utilize the support and trust of adults in the form of case managers, program staff, and mentors show great promise in their ability to positively affect the long-term trajectories of high-risk young people.[29] There is also an expansive body of psychological and educational research about the importance of positive relationships to student resilience and engagement. Programs and agencies serving young people must expand these programmatic elements where they are already showing success and improve upon them if they are not.

It is also clear from the many focus group responses we encountered that young people highly valued the opinions and views of their peers when it came to re-connecting to positive options. More entities need to build out components of programming that foster stable and reliable relationships between caring adults and youth, while also more fully leveraging the relationships of young peoples' peer groups and networks.

Provide Young People the Support Services They Need to Be Successful

Many barriers to success exist for the District's young people and it is unrealistic to think that high numbers of youth will succeed in the long-term if these barriers cannot be addressed in the immediate. Programs that operate strong case management arms and maintain a working knowledge of existing referral opportunities can help provide young people with access to resources such as food stamps, child care, behavioral health services, housing assistance, and income supports, all of which are vital to ensuring success. Given the very low level of financial resources youth in the DCAYA survey reported, supports like these are especially essential for young people who either cannot find work to support themselves or face the difficult decision of how to balance work with educational opportunities. Applying for many of these services and supports is often time consuming and confusing and having a trusted individual to help youth navigate these processes is essential. Furthermore, providing young people in programs with a source of income and other benefits like transportation stipends is an incredibly important feature of programs that successfully serve disconnected young people. Youth heavily rely on these resources when enrolled in a program. Thus, programs and agencies need to ensure that youth are receiving benefits and supports with regularity.

Strengthen the Bridges Between Programming Levels So That Higher Goals Can Be Achieved

Many youth in the DCAYA survey noted that they had aspirations to attend college, seek out training options, and find secure employment. However, the enrollment of young people under age 25 at the District's largest low/no-cost post-secondary institution, the University of the District of Columbia Community College, is very low compared to other age brackets.[30] As previously noted, youth are also struggling to access and persist in the unsubsidized labor market.

Programs or agencies that are not currently offering quality services and supports to help graduates enter and succeed in the next level of the educational or career development must do more. This means fostering better collaboration among service providers at each level of educational/training service provision to ensure young people do not become disconnected from education at key transition points. The creation or expansion of program models like dual enrollment, bridge programs, and comprehensive alumni services should be considered as viable prescriptions to this issue. Many of these strategies grew out of the K–12 sector and have seen success in getting young people to access and succeed in post-secondary environments. The dual enrollment strategy has especially promising early outcomes when serving formerly disconnected youth.[31]

Young people also need more opportunities for experiential learning and on the job experience in supportive work environments. It is clear from multiple years of high youth unemployment and the youth survey responses that young people in general lack work experience. Programs need to better fill this gap for the young people they serve. Special attention should be paid to ensuring young people are exposed to a range of work-related and real-world experience activities while they are in programming that can be later translated into job skills.

Improve Program Effectiveness by Regularly Soliciting the Opinions of Youth

Young people are the best source of information about themselves and their peers, yet their opinions and ideas are often overlooked in favor of outcomes data. Youth need to be consulted regularly about what they think is working, what is not working, and what solutions/ideas they have to make the programs better. Soliciting these opinions will make programs stronger, provide insights on the changing landscape of this population, and more effectively identify successful interventions that respond to the dynamic youth population.

Evaluate and Measure the Effectiveness of Specific Program Elements

Despite having some anecdotal evidence and some good ideas about what is working, there are still many gaps in the research base on disconnected youth. Programs and organizations that serve this population need to be able to demonstrate which specific program elements are leading to positive outcomes in both the short- and long-term. Special attention should be paid to program elements that lead to long-term persistence in educational options up to, and including, the post-secondary level and a sustained presence in the unsubsidized labor market. If approached collectively and collaboratively, evaluation efforts can be effectively leveraged to drive system expansion or redesign efforts and more effectively guide investments in this system.

Focus on Cross-System Collaboration

Long-term success for the District's young people hinges on the ability of stakeholders to work together to form a comprehensive web of supports for young people across the spectrum of educational abilities, work experience, and social-service needs. This web needs to meet all young people where they are developmentally, as well as geographically. Functionally, this means programs must work with one another to better communicate with young people; collect data; establish a network of referrals and shared resources; and share program models/interventions that are demonstrating success. Within this collective approach, special attention should be dedicated to filling noticeable gaps in service provision (e.g. programs targeting younger youth or special populations, programs in certain geographic areas of the city); providing experiences that incorporate post-secondary attainment and employment; and bringing pervasive issues, such as unrecognized barriers youth face or flawed assumptions, to light.

For Policymakers, Government Staff, Funders and Other Leaders:

Fund Re-connection Models that Offer Centralized Information and Resources

For many youth, the re-connection process is convoluted, burdensome, and frustrating. The disparate and siloed nature of programs and services is not easy to understand, much less utilize. Young people need honest and straightforward sources of information to make good decisions about their futures. Often they require additional assistance understanding the steps necessary for re-enrollment or service access, as well as support in identifying and assembling the documentation needed to access critical programs and services. We cannot assume the majority of currently disconnected young people will just "figure it out" and achieve long-term success.

Re-connection models that utilize the concept of a "one stop shop" (often called re-engagement or youth connection centers) have shown great promise in other jurisdictions across the country. These models serve as central hubs of trusted information where young people can go to explore their options. Many of these models utilize program elements like strong, upfront case management that links young people with essential services (e.g. housing, income supports, etc.) and intensive intake services so that young people immediately begin down a path towards re-connection rather than languish as they wait for a program to open up.

Lessons learned in other communities do show the need for buy-in from multiple levels of government and non-governmental partners. It is imperative for those who control funding streams to recognize that efforts to connect young people to positive opportunities will be inherently limited if a wide range of stakeholders are not being continuously engaged, held accountable, and most importantly, funded to work collaboratively in service connection and delivery. Further, though a one stop shop is a good step towards connecting young people to existing re-connection options, the city must ensure that there are enough developmentally appropriate and high-quality options to refer young people to.

Fund Educational Re-engagement Efforts Across the Spectrum of Need and At An Appropriate Level

Young people's disconnection from school, work, and other positive supports occurs along a continuum. At one end of the continuum, young people are fully connected to school and the labor market (to the extent possible for younger youth). At the other end of the spectrum, youth are formally disconnected from school, the labor market, or the activities that help them prepare for school or labor market entry. Few youth fall squarely into either one of these end points, making it imperative to recognize the diversity of characteristics and challenges faced by the majority of young people who fall between these two extremes. Other jurisdictions have managed this variability in need by applying a "multiple path-ways" approach that begins by discovering the scope of need at various educational levels. The District is currently engaged in a similar effort via the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education. However, there must be very deliberate follow up to this exercise. The next step must be for funders to recognize the value of multiple access points for youth and to collaborate in funding efforts so young people have a wide variety of educational options that are catered to their individual needs. Creating appropriate access points that meet youth where they are educationally and are "best fit" options for young people will undoubtedly lead to higher rates of success if the options are quality ones.

Support Multi-Year Funding Streams for Programs That Demonstrate Competencies and Success Working with At-Risk and Disconnected Youth

There are currently an estimated 2,700 youth who lack a high school diploma or equivalent and are also not working in the District.[32] It is unrealistic to expect many of these youth, but particularly those with more significant needs, to achieve a high school credential and enter a post-secondary option or the labor market in one or even two years of programming. Yet the funding streams currently supporting high numbers of young people in this population expire after two years. The District needs more long- term funding models that can be utilized to work with the young people who have the longest road to travel when it comes to achieving lasting success. Similarly, even programs that are working with young people who are "close" to obtaining a high school credential could positively benefit from more secure funding streams that extend over multiple years of programming. Services should not end when a young person obtains a high school credential. The goal must be for young people to obtain some post-secondary experience and a sustained presence in the labor market. Funding streams must account for sustained transition supports that are developmentally defined.

Ensure Funded Program Models Include Strong Barrier Remediation and Case Management Components and Include Funds Specifically for These Services in Contracts/Grants

The effect of caring and supportive adult role models in the lives of young people cannot be denied, but too often programs that work with high-risk populations struggle to maintain a comprehensive case management system due to funding. Furthermore, the government contracting/grants process sometimes rewards quantity of youth served, often at the expense of quality. This cannot be the norm if the District truly wants to combat youth unemployment and promote self-sufficiency. Strong one-on-one case management and supports to overcome

barriers to work such as childcare, transportation, mental health, and housing need to be considered essential services when working with high-risk populations, and should be accounted for in the program criteria and cost assumptions for all contract/grant proposals.

Ensure Adult Safety Net Services Are Accessible to Older Youth and Young Adults

The barriers to success young people face are not so different from those often faced by adults struggling to achieve labor market success. Lack of childcare, not having enough resources for transportation or other necessary expenses for work or school, housing costs, and general income insecurity are all issues that impact workers across the District. However, youth and young adults are currently accessing social services in relatively small numbers when compared to older counterparts, despite the fact that many youth are eligible. Individuals and entities with oversight of supports such as Temporary Assistance to Need Families (TANF), WIC (Women, Infants and Children program), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the childcare voucher program, the Earned Incomes Tax Credit (EITC), and others need to ensure that young people are accessing appropriate social service supports at a proportional rate. These programs are no less important to young workers and families than they are to older individuals.

Focus on Cross-System Collaboration

Long-term success for the District's young people hinges on the ability of stakeholders to work together to form a comprehensive web of supports for young people across the spectrum of educational abilities, work experience, and social-service needs. This web needs to meet all young people where they are developmentally, as well as geographically. Functionally, this means programs must work with one another to better communicate with young people; collect data; establish a network of referrals and shared resources; and share program models/interventions that are demonstrating success. Within this collective approach, special attention should be dedicated to filling noticeable gaps in service provision (e.g. programs targeting younger youth or special populations, programs in certain geographic areas of the city); providing experiences that incorporate post-secondary attainment and employment; and bringing pervasive issues, such as unrecognized barriers youth face or flawed assumptions, to light.

Funders and those with oversight capabilities of government programming have the unique ability to ensure meaningful collaboration occurs on a regular basis. Elected officials can require that agencies publicly report on their coordination and collaboration efforts and require transparent data collection and outcome reporting. Private funders and public funders can ensure that potential and existing grantees are funded in a way that both incentivizes and supports participation in system collaboration efforts. These efforts will go a long way in ensuring collaboration is embedded in the institutions serving disconnected young people.

Conclusion

Long-term success for the District's young people hinges on implementing positive change across a broad mix of youth and adult-serving government agencies, non-profits, funders, and institutions. While this level of systemic reform does present any number of challenges, these challenges are not insurmountable. Other jurisdictions, including many with similar demographic characteristics to the District, have enacted broad-based reform that is leading to community-level outcomes for disconnected young people. DCAYA's survey findings and recommendations are meant as starting points so that the District can achieve its goals to ensure every young person who has disconnected from school, work, and other positive opportunities is reconnected to the education to career pipeline.

Footnotes

1 Office of the State Superintendent for Education. "Official Graduation Rates SY 2011–2012". Accessed 06/15/13 at http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mayor/release_content/attach-ments/OSSEAdjustedCohortGraduationRateOverview.pdf.

2 Office of the State Superintendent for Education, Statewide Longitudinal Data System, SY 2010–2011. Information provided at Raise DC Disconnected Youth Change Network October 2012 meeting.

3 Raise DC Analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011 Local Area Unemployment Statistics,www.bls.gov/lau/ptable14full11.pdf. Accessed 04/20/13 at http://raisedc.net/pdfs/DME-003-ReportCard2.0.pdf. For further documentation of the historic youth unemployment during recent years, see Sum, Andrew & Joseph McLaughlin. 2011. *The Steep Decline in Teen Summer Employment in the U.S., 2000–2010 and the Summer 2011 Teen Job Market Disaster: Another Bummer Summer.* Boston, MA: Center for Labor Market Studies.

4 Unpublished analysis by the Brookings Institution of 2011 American Community Survey Microdata.

5 For a current membership list and description of the Raise DC initiative please reference http://raisedc.net. For a current membership list and description of the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates and its coalition of members please reference http:dc-aya.org.

6 Bridgeland, John and Jessica A. Milano. 2012. *Opportunity Road: The Promise and Challenge of America's Forgotten Youth.* Accessed 04/20/13 at http://www.civicenterprises.net/medialibrary/docs/opportunity_road.pdf.

7 See Burd-Sharps, Sarah & Kristen Lewis. 2012. *One in Seven: Ranking Youth Disconnection in the 25 Largest Metro Areas.* Pg 14. Accessed 05/20/13 at http://www.measureofamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/MOA-One_in_Seven09-14.pdf. Also Ross, Martha. 2011. Strengthening Educational and Career Pathways for D.C. Youth. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, and Robertson, Catherine & Nita Baum. 2010. Re-Engaging Disconnected Youth in Washington, D.C. Washington, DC: See Forever Foundation.

8 Unpublished analysis by the Brookings Institution of 2011 American Community Survey Microdata.

9 Unpublished analysis by the Brookings Institution of 2011 American Community Survey Microdata.

10 Wald, Michael & Martinez. Tia. 2003. *Connected By 25: Improving the Life Chances of the Country's Most Vulnerable 14–24 Year Olds.* Stanford, California: William and Flora Hewlett Foundation Working Paper. Pg. 4.

11 Greater Washington Research at Brookings. 2012. Demographic and Economic Trends in the National Capital Region and their Effects on Children, Youth and Families. Pg.6. Accessed 08/05/13 at http://www.vppartners.org/learning/reports/demographic-and-economic-trends-national-capital-region-and-their-effects-children-.

12 Rosch, Jacob, Dana Benson and Bryan Hassel. "Youth at High Risk of Disconnection: A Data Update of Michael Wald and Tia Martinez's Connected by 25: Improving the Life Chances of the Country's Most Vulnerable 14–24 Year Olds". Presentation for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, December 2008. Accessed 06/16/13 at http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/Publications.aspx?pubguid=%7B-61CC54FE-28E6-443A-8421-25CBD8D6B90D%7D.

13 Ibid, slide 15.

14 For a more comprehensive analysis of the District's suspension and expulsion rates, see *District Discipline: The Overuse of School Suspension and Expulsion in the District of Columbia.* 2013. Washington, DC: DC Lawyers for Youth. Accessible at: http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/dcly/pages/64/attachments/original/1371689930/District_Discipline_Report.pdf?1371689930

15 Carnevale, Anthony. Stephen J. Rose and Ban Cheah. *2012. The College Payoff: Education, Occupa-tions and Earnings.* Washington DC: Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce. Accessed 08/03/13 at http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/collegepayoff-complete.pdf.

16 Luke C. Moore High School and the DCPS STAY programs at Ballou High School and Roosevelt High School are notable exceptions. Profiles of these and other DCPS options are available at http://profiles.dcps.dc.gov.

17 National Center for Education Statistics. 2004. *Educational Attainment of Dropouts Eight Years Later.* Washington, DC: US Department of Education, Institute for Educational Sciences. Accessed 07/19/13 at http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005026.pdf.

18 Washington State Institute for Public Policy. 2009. *What Works? Targeted Truancy and Dropout Programs in Middle and High School.* Olympia, Washington. Accessed 06/23/13 at http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/rptfiles/09-06-2201.pdf

19 District Department of Transportation. School Transit Subsidy Program. Accessed 09/01/13 at http://ddot.dc.gov/DC/DDOT/Services/Transit+Subsidies/School+Transit+Subsidy+Program

20 The DCAYA survey did not ask questions specifically about how much money young people spent getting to work due to the large number of young people in the sample who were not employed.

21 100 Hours of Community Service is a requirement for graduation from the District's public schools, both DCPS and charters. More information on graduation diploma requirement for DC students is accessible at: http://dc.gov/DCPS/College+and+Careers/High+School+Planning/Graduation+Requirements

22 Notably, 30% of total survey respondents skipped this question entirely.

23 Reed, Jenny. 2012. *Disappearing Act: Affordable Housing in DC is Vanishing Amid Sharply Rising Housing Costs.* Washington, DC: DC Fiscal Policy Institute. Accessed 06/20/13 at http://www.dcfpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/5-7-12-Housing-and-Income-Trends-FINAL.pdf

24 Fry, Richard. 2013. *A Rising Share of Young Adults Live in Their Parents' Home.* Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for Social and Demographic Trends. Accessed 08/05/13 at http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/08/01/a-rising-share-of-young-adults-live-in-their-parents-home/.

25 Annie E. Casey Foundation. Analysis of 2007–2011 American Community Survey Data. "18–24 Year Olds in Poverty, District of Columbia" Accessed 08/13/13 via Kids Count E-Book at: http://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/51-persons-18-to-24-in poverty?loc=10&loct=3#detailed/3/any/false/867,133,38,35,18/any/337,338.

26 Unpublished analysis by the Brookings Institution of 2011 American Community Survey Microdata.

27 National Research Council on Community Programs. "Best Practices for Positive Youth Development". Accessed 06/20/13 at http://www.npcresearch.com/Files/Strengths%20Training%20Binder/44.%20Best%20Practices%20Positive%20Youth%20Development.pdf

28 The District's Department of Employment Services Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) has historically served upwards of 10,000 young people ages 14–21 during the summer months. More information on SYEP is accessible via the DOES website at: http://does.dc.gov/service/summer-youth-employment-program

29 More information on the Latin American Youth Center's Promotores Program including interim evaluation results and explanation of future impact evaluation is available on the LAYC website. http://www.layc-dc.org/index.php/programs/promotores.html

30 University of the District of Columbia Community College, "Workforce Development and Lifelong Learning Unduplicated Enrollment Counts" Accessed 09/01/13 at http://cc.udc.edu/docs/wd/130822-WDLL_Student_Outcomes_FY2013.pdf.

31 Martin, Vanessa and Joseph Broadus. 2013. *Enhancing GED Instruction to Prepare Students for College and Careers: Early Success in Laguardia Community College's Bridge to Health and Business Program.* New York: MDRC. Accessed 06/12/13 at http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Enhancing_GED_Instruction_brief.pdf.

32 Unpublished analysis by the Brookings Institution of 2011 American Community Survey Microdata.

Appendix A

Local Per Student Funding (Uniform Per Student Funding Formula)
Next Step Public Charter School
Youthbuild Public Charter School
Latin American Youth Center Career Academy Public Charter School
Maya Angelou Young Adult Learning Center Public Charter School
Carlos Rosario Public Charter School
Ballou STAY (DCPS)

Local Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) Funding
Youth Services Center
Mentoring Today

Local Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA)
Office of Youth Empowerment
United Planning Organization

**Federal Workforce Investment Act Title II Adult Basic Education
(Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language)**
Southeast Ministry
The Perry School

Federal Workforce Investment Act Out of School Youth Formula Funds
YWCA National Capital Area
Covenant House Washington
Latin American Youth Center
Academy of Hope

Federal Job Corps Funding
Potomac Job Corps

Federal Youthbuild Funding
Sasha Bruce Youthbuild