

# "Putting Youth to Work" Series

Examples of Effective Practice in Distressed Communities

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## Boston, MA

### Best Practice Examples in:

- ✓ Convening body
- ✓ Partnership with Education
- ✓ Workforce and Employer engagement
- ✓ Partnership with Juvenile Justice

### OVERVIEW

Boston faces the challenge of addressing barriers to education and employment for a significant number of disconnected youth. Every year between 1,500 and 2,000 youth drop out of school and approximately 11,000 youth ages 16 to 24 also are not attending school and not working<sup>1</sup>. Boston, however, is a strong example of strategic planning, capacity and partnerships supporting a

comprehensive workforce development system for youth to help prepare them for successful adulthood. In Boston, the strategic planning around youth service delivery occurs within the Workforce Investment Act Youth Council, which is supported by the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC). The PIC is the intermediary organization connecting education, workforce development and business. A subcommittee or partner to the Council is the Youth Transitions Task Force. The Youth Transitions Task Force is focused on an overall goal of lowering the high school dropout rate and could be seen as the research body for youth development and service delivery in Boston. The WIA Youth Council advises the Youth Transitions Task Force through collaborative strategic planning and assessments on overall youth service delivery. The Youth Transitions Task Force, organized by the PIC, is made up of state agencies, local alternative education and youth development providers, and state and school officials working to raise awareness of the dropout crisis and its impact on youth and the community<sup>2</sup>.

The Mayor's Office of Jobs and Community Services (OJCS) is the City's workforce development agency responsible for administering a number of federal, state and local grant programs. OJCS manages the grants, and monitors and provides technical assistance for alternative education, career exploration, summer employment, and youth development providers funded by the federal WIA, the HUD-funded Community Development Block Grant, state Youthworks, and City funds. OJCS also operates programs that provide direct service to young people, including Youth Options Unlimited, which serves young adults involved in the juvenile justice system, and Read Boston and Write Boston, programs designed to improve the reading and writing skills of youth in the public school system. Approximately 400 youth are enrolled in education and workforce development contracts administered by OJCS. About 10,000 youth are connected with summer employment through a combination of city, state, federal, and private funds. OJCS' Youth Options Unlimited program serves approximately 350 young people involved in the juvenile and adult justice systems. Finally, an additional 49,000 youth are served by the Community Development Block Grant, Read Boston, and Write Boston.

OJCS embeds case management into its education and workforce development contracts, including summer jobs. Whether the grant is for alternative education, career exploration, training or other workforce development activities, case management is a strong component within each contract. Programs funded with federal workforce funds have designated case management staff who work with youth to develop individual case plans articulating

personal, education, and career goals. These programs are required to provide ongoing follow-up service for at least 12 months after program completion. In Boston, a host of community providers are vendors for OJCS and provide comprehensive workforce and youth development services at their sites. The Boston Youth Service Network (BYSN) is the network of non-profit service providers who offer alternative education, career exploration, and summer job programs for youth at risk. OJCS funds these organizations and works with them on program development and policy development<sup>3</sup>. Three one-stop career centers in the city staff one person in each center devoted to working with young adults to provide information and support in accessing education and career development opportunities, including secondary and postsecondary options and skills training programs.

## MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

### *Education*

The Task Force has been working hard to raise awareness of and develop solutions to the dropout crisis. The Task Force began an advocacy campaign, informing key decision makers and the public on the issue by releasing the publication *Too Big to Be Seen: The Invisible Dropout Crisis in Boston and America*. The Task Force also drafted and helped pass legislation that addresses dropout prevention and recovery. The creation of such an effective coalition required collaboration among key state agencies, such as Public Health, Public Safety, Labor and Workforce Development and Education, and local school officials and community organizations<sup>4</sup>. The Task Force, in partnership with the school system, created a dropout recovery program in which dropout outreach specialists get a list of all the youth in the city who have dropped out, find them and reconnect them to education or training opportunities.

Within Boston's leadership, the mayor's commitment to education was made clear by his declaration of support to double the college graduation rate for Boston Public Schools and is devoting funding to support this new goal. The Youth Council Chair was strategically appointed by the mayor to also sit on the school committee - fostering an important relationship that brings workforce development knowledge into educational decision making. Also, the new superintendent of Boston Public Schools has reorganized her cabinet and has three deputies, one focused solely on high schools. The high school deputy understands the importance of the alternative education system and offering more vocational programs and activities. The school system has a history of supporting alternative education options, but with new leadership it has renewed energy.

### *Workforce Preparation and Employer Engagement*

There are several layers to employer engagement in Boston. Within Boston's School-to-Career (STC) strategy, the Boston Private Industry Council places a career specialist in every school to work with high school students year-round to prepare them for paid employment. PIC career specialists identify students' interests, develop job descriptions with employers, and facilitate the interview and matching process. PIC staff support students and their supervisors on the job<sup>5</sup>. The relationship with the career specialist is a key component to the summer youth employment program, Summer of Work and Learning, and makes a strong effort to match student's career interests with their summer job placement.

Also, every high school (as well as elementary and middle school) has at least one corporate or employer partner that sponsors the school and supports workforce preparation and career development by supporting job shadow days and career fairs, serving on advisory panels, organizing volunteers to tutor or mentor students. Employer engagement in education and workforce preparation for youth is now institutionalized in the city.

Youth Options Unlimited (YOU), Boston’s comprehensive reentry program supported by the Mayor’s Office, offers a Multi-Tier Transitional Employment Approach to gaining workforce skills and employment.

*Level One (Pre-Placement):* The first level job readiness training and professional development track is offered for youth during summer and for year round groups. This paid two-week pre-employment series focuses on communication (with peers and supervisor) decision-making, conflict resolution, team work, maintaining a positive attitude, and defining success. These topics are explored and examined through role plays and an interactive curriculum based on the issues youth struggle with when in the work environment and other areas of their lives. The completion of the Pre-Placement curriculum is critical to future retention within the YOU employment continuum.

*Level Two (Bridge):* This second level gives young people a chance to improve workplace behavior and their academic skills. The Bridge Program takes a small group of youth, partners with agencies/ organizations to help young people develop in a particular skill area, continues to develop youth professionally and adds an academic component. Reading and math skills development is infused into the TES model.

*Level Three (Individual Placement-IP):* The third level offers employment placement and career counseling support once young people have acquired the fundamentals. Individual youth are matched with a community partner in a position that allows for more independence than the Bridge team and the opportunity for increased hours (up to 25 per week).

YOU, with the support of its partner agencies, offers GED classes and a high school diploma curriculum at the YOU Center. The GEDPlus program is housed at YOU, as is the Community Transition School, a collaboration between the Boston Public Schools and the Department of Youth Services offering education services to young people re-entering the community from long-term treatment.

Level three also provides youth placement in entry level employment with support from career development staff that help youth focus on increasing skill development, acquiring further credentials and placement in positions that allow for personal growth and expanding opportunities. Placements for older youth are in primary labor-market positions in the private sector or long-term occupational skills training programs. Career Specialists provide advice and support to individuals at this level, with a view to bringing youth to a point where they can compete independently in the labor market<sup>6</sup>.

## *Juvenile Justice*

The Mayor's Office of Jobs and Community Services, and the City of Boston have made consistent decisions to focus service provision on the most disconnected youth, specifically targeting juvenile justice involved youth. The partnerships required to effectively serve these youth have been developed over time and are key to creating a comprehensive system of supports and services for youth involved in the juvenile justice system. The partners in Boston's justice initiatives include the Boston Private Industry Council, Mayor's Office of Jobs and Community Services, Youth Options Unlimited Boston, Boston Police Department, Boston Redevelopment Authority, Department of Probation, Suffolk County House of Correction, Boston's Center for Youth and Families, Department of Youth Services, Boston Public Schools, and the Department of Children and Families.

YOU is an example of a city-wide program helping young court-involved and gang-affiliated young people turn toward a positive, self-sufficient future. It is a strong example of partnerships among workforce development, juvenile justice, law enforcement, and other youth serving systems described above. YOU connects youth with intensive case management, educational opportunities and support, and employment year-round. It has a three-part service system: (1) intervention in detention facilities and referrals from law enforcement partners; (2) stabilization, case management and support services provided by YOU staff; and (3) education and employment readiness and placement support to get youth on the path to skill development and self-sustainability. Since 2005, YOU has served exclusively court-involved youth and is sustaining its efforts with the support of the state Shannon Anti-Gang grant - a program that requires multi-disciplinary approaches to combating gang violence through law enforcement initiatives such as the targeting of enforcement resources to programs aimed at successful reintegration of released inmates and youth from juvenile detention, and programs that provide youth with supervised out-of-school activities, among others.

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<sup>1</sup> American Community Survey, 2006, <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>.

<sup>2</sup> Hastings, S., *Harnessing the Power of Advocacy: Massachusetts' Efforts to Increase State Resources for Youth*, CLASP, December 8, 2008

<sup>3</sup> City of Boston, Office of Jobs and Community Development Web site, <http://www.cityofboston.gov/jcs/youth.asp>.

<sup>4</sup> Hastings, S., *Harnessing the Power of Advocacy*.

<sup>5</sup> City of Boston, Office of Jobs and Community Development Web site, <http://www.cityofboston.gov/jcs/youth.asp>.

<sup>6</sup> Youth Options Unlimited, <http://www.bostonredevelopmentauthority.org/yoboston/en/tes.asp>.

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