



**Recommitting to Our Nation's Youth:
Building on the Legacy of Youth Opportunity
Implications for Federal Policy
March 2010**



For young people in many of our nation's high poverty communities there is a devastating lack of opportunity to succeed. More than 5 million youth are out of school and out of work. For young people who live in communities plagued by high dropout rates, high youth unemployment rates, greater incidence of juvenile crime, violence, and gang activity, the prospects are bleak and there are few pathways to education, work and responsible citizenship for those disconnected from work and school.

Fortunately, we have a roadmap for reaching out to, reconnecting and providing opportunities to disconnected youth. Agencies and organizations that serve youth who are disconnected from school and employment are increasingly working together using a systems approach that improves outcomes and reduces the gaps in services and supports that can occur in more fragmented systems. In the first half of last decade nearly 100,000 disadvantaged and disconnected youth nationwide were able to continue or complete their education and enter the workforce thanks to Youth Opportunity Programming. Unfortunately, funding was discontinued in 2005, and in the ensuing years federal funding for comprehensive youth programming continued to decline despite this being the most difficult economic environment since pre-World War II for the nation's youth.

The Opportunity Gap

- 30 percent of our young people – and 50% of our minority youth - do not graduate from high school.
- In 2007, one out of seven (16%) people between the ages of 16 and 24 were high school dropouts.
- Dropping out of high school has the impact of a permanent recession for our youth. High school dropouts earn less than 6% of all dollars earned in the U.S.
- In the nation's 50 largest cities, high school dropouts make \$10,000 less per year than high school graduates, and \$34,000 less than college graduates.
- Nationwide, 37% of high school dropouts are steadily employed. They are more than twice as likely as people with jobs to live in poverty.
- If just one-third of dropouts were to earn a high school diploma, savings on food stamps, housing assistance, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) would amount to \$10.8 billion—more than enough to cover the cost of investing in these young peoples' education.

The lack of economic opportunity for millions of youth and young adults in high poverty communities has only been exacerbated by the recent recession. Despite the small improvements in job growth in recent months, one sector of the workforce continues to lag behind others – young people 16 – 24, especially those with limited education and job skills. They need services and supports to help them complete their education and get the training they need to compete in the workforce. However, even before the current economic recession, business and education leaders recognized the nation needed a fresh approach to educating and training our youth. To ensure the strength of our economy, and our democracy, we must provide all of our young people with the opportunity to reach their full potential. We cannot afford to ignore the millions of youth who have fallen by the wayside and the millions more who are at imminent risk of disconnecting from the mainstream.

The Youth Opportunity Movement: Changing the “Opportunity” landscape for youth in high poverty communities

YO AT A GLANCE

- Youth Opportunity Grants were awarded to 36 high-poverty urban, rural, and Native American communities.
- Grants ranged from \$3.1 to \$43.8 million over five years and provided the resources to put in place comprehensive approaches at considerable scale.
- Youth Opportunity Community Centers were established to provide safe and accessible places where youth could receive long-term services for achieving employment and educational outcomes.
- Public, private, and nonprofit organizations partnered to leverage resources and expand services.
- 78% of the communities blended staffing and/or resources from at least three youth serving systems—workforce, local school district, and juvenile justice.
- Youth Opportunity sites were very successful in creating a substantial number of work experience and labor market exposure opportunities for youth. More than 70,000 work or labor market connections were developed as part of the preparation or transition experiences for youth.
- Critical secondary and post-secondary linkages were made and designed to meet youth participants from where they were and connect them to post-secondary options. Nearly 73,000 young people were engaged academic remediation, enrolled in alternative schools, SAT Prep, GED Prep, and/or entered into 2-or- 4-year post-secondary institutions.

The Youth Opportunity (YO) federal grant program was designed to overhaul the nation’s youth delivery system. Based on the “best practices” gleaned from federal investments in youth services made since the 1970’s, YO provided communities with sufficient resources and flexibility to reengage and keep youth in low-income communities on track. Initiated in 2000 by the United States Department of Labor (DOL) through the passage of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, the initiative called for the creation of a comprehensive youth service system that provided skills training, basic education and work experience, committed involvement of caring adults, and developmental opportunities aimed at assisting the young people in the successful transition to adulthood and responsible citizenship.

At the heart of the Youth Opportunity story are the thousands of youth whose lives have been changed because of access to the tools and resources they needed to prepare for the future. During the five-year funding period, 36 communities enrolled 92,000 mostly minority youth – 48 percent of whom had dropped out of school. An evaluation of the program, commissioned by DOL, showed that grantees were able to increase educational attainment, Pell Grant receipt, labor market participation, and employment rates and earnings for program participants. The evaluation

proved that when adequate resources are targeted at building community capacity to serve youth, labor force participation and education outcomes can improve.

Implications for Federal Policy: Building on Existing Strength, Experience, and Capacity

What It Takes: Common elements of a successful youth service delivery system

A body of knowledge developed over the past decade points to key elements of successful practice working with youth in high risk situations, including those that have dropped out of high school.

- **A strong convening entity** to amass stakeholders, shape a community vision, maximize resource sharing, and hold systems accountable to that vision.
- **An effective administrative agent** to work in partnership with the education system, other youth systems, and community providers to assure that the vision of the convening entity is effectively implemented.
- **A well-trained case management arm** which is responsible for engaging youth by identifying and meeting needs in the areas of education, employment, basic skills, and wrap-around supports.
- **Strong partnerships across systems that serve youth**, such as workforce, education, juvenile justice and child welfare systems, to share resources and provide additional support to very vulnerable youth.
- **High quality work experience and career exposure components** which provide hands-on exposure to the work place, instill appropriate work behaviors and ethics, and allow for exploration of various occupations and career options with strategic linkages to post secondary options.

The YO communities learned many lessons about what is needed to institute and maintain successful and efficient systems for serving youth, especially “hard to reach” young people who have dropped out of high school or are in disadvantaged situations. These essential elements include: *saturation, cross-systems collaboration, strong case management, and a robust jobs and paid work experience feature.*

Saturation: Increase the capacity of high-poverty communities to implement innovative community-based strategies to serve youth. To truly be effective over the long term, communities need funding adequate to take youth service delivery systems to scale and offer services and supports to all disconnected youth who can use them.

Cross-systems Collaboration: Develop horizontal alignment among all youth-serving systems, including workforce, education, including adult education, and other youth serving systems –i.e. child welfare, justice. These systems must work in concert to prioritize services for vulnerable youth and coordinate transitional support for them. We learned, in part, from the Youth

Opportunity experience that in order to substantially improve education and employment outcomes for disconnected or at-risk youth, all of a community’s sectors, systems, and resources must be connected in a more strategic way to form a comprehensive youth service delivery system of considerable scale.

Strong Case Management: Legislation must provide for well-trained staff, including individuals who monitor the progress of youth being served, provide counsel, and help coordinate services.

This is critical to the success of any program that provides myriad supports. Youth services are no exception. Strong case management coupled with the presence of caring adults in the Youth Opportunities systems helped keep young people on-track and engaged.

Subsidized Jobs and Paid Work Experience: Funding for paid work experiences, internships, youth corps, is vital to ensure young people, especially those in communities of high economic distress, have “hands-on” exposure to work and the workplace. Essential to any youth service delivery system should be ample opportunities for youth to access internships, pre-apprenticeships, subsidized and transitional jobs, including both summer and year-round work experiences. Preparing for and succeeding in employment was a cornerstone feature of YO. It allowed communities that had long-standing summer jobs programs through thirty years of federal investments to continue providing this service to youth residents, when the federal stand-alone summer jobs program was discontinued, and expand their subsidized jobs and workforce skills activities to beyond summer.

Congress is now considering the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA). What’s more, the President’s Fiscal Year 2011 budget proposal signaled the Administration’s intention to revamp both pieces of legislation to include such concepts as investments in Innovations Funds, cross-systems coordination between the Departments of Education and Labor, and a continuing emphasis on secondary and post secondary education.

This is an opportunity to focus on needs of youth who are undereducated and unskilled in a labor market that requires that individuals have high levels of education and skills to get good jobs that pay decent wages. These cornerstone reauthorizations can set the tone for our nation’s response to the challenges youth in high poverty communities face and define the roles that WIA and ESEA can play in tandem with other federal funding streams – such as, Perkins, IDEA, national service - that can help prepare youth to compete in today's economy.

Jobs legislation and other Obama Administration proposals, including the Community College Initiative and DOL’s Youth Innovations Fund should take into consideration the successes and the best practices of the YO programs, and incorporate key program elements for working with disconnected or disconnecting youth going forward. Those include strategic programming, cross-system collaboration, support services, and multiple avenues for post-secondary access and greater labor market connectedness. Fortunately, legislation using this approach already exists. The RAISE UP Act is a dropout recovery bill that builds on the lessons learned through the YO program. RAISE UP seeks to reengage out-of-school youth in education, work and career preparation, and postsecondary education. Local efforts will be created or expanded to connect youth to a range of options, in and outside of traditional school systems that lead to a high school diploma, industry recognized certificate or credential, or college degree through the development of intentional dropout recovery systems at the local level.

In our increasingly global world economy, every worker is important, so investments in young people must be a centerpiece of any federal effort to reinvigorate our economy and rebuild the capacity and competitiveness of America’s workforce.

ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN FOR YOUTH

Housed at the Center for Law and Social Policy, the Campaign for Youth is an alliance of organizations who are concerned about the persistence, yet seeming invisibility, of the challenges confronting more than 5 million young people in this nation who are disconnected from education, employment and opportunity. Established in 2002 by the leadership of national youth-serving organizations, the Campaign for Youth's mission is to build a united voice for disadvantaged and disconnected youth in this nation, and to build a constituency for action. *For more information on the Campaign for Youth and the partnering organizations, please visit www.campaignforyouth.org or email kbird@clasp.org.*

ABOUT THE CCRY NETWORK

The Communities Collaborating to Reconnect Youth (CCRY) Network is an affinity group of communities that have invested in considerable capacity-building and innovation to reach and reconnect youth who are disconnected from school and employment. The network is as a collective learning environment that promotes peer-to-peer learning and hands-on assistance in disseminating and expanding best practice, especially in communities with high levels of youth distress. The network aims to bring attention to the work and innovative practice that is occurring in communities across the country, and to make input into state and federal policy on issues affecting disconnected youth in distressed communities. *For more information on the CCRY Network, contact: Christopher Scott Policy Analyst Center for Law & Social Policy cscott@clasp.org.*

ABOUT CLASP

Since 1968, CLASP has been a trusted resource, a creative architect for systems change, and one of the country's most effective voices for low income people. CLASP's mission is to develop and advocate for policies at the federal, state and local levels that improve the lives of low-income people. In particular, we seek policies that work to strengthen families and create pathways to education and work. *For more information about CLASP, please visit www.clasp.org.*

ABOUT FIRST FOCUS

First Focus is a bipartisan advocacy organization that is committed to making children and families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions. First Focus brings both traditional and non-traditional leaders together to advocate for federal policies that will improve the lives of America's children. Child health, education, family economics, child welfare, and child safety are the core issue areas in which First Focus promotes bipartisan policy solutions. *For more information about First Focus, please visit www.firstfocus.net.*

ABOUT THE NATIONAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT COALITION

The National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) is a national membership network that improves the effectiveness of organizations that seek to help youth become productive citizens. Toward this end, NYEC sets and promotes quality standards; tracks, crafts and influences policy; provides and supports professional development; and builds the capacity of organizations and programs. *For more information about NYEC, please visit www.nyec.org.*