

# Early Lessons from Strategic Assessment Initiative and Implications for Future Funding

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May 4, 2005

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## **Introduction**

In January 2005, the Struggling Students and Out-of-School Youth Workgroup of the Youth Transition Funders Group launched the Strategic Assessment Initiative in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, OR, and San Jose. The goal of the initiative is to help cities move from piecemeal to systemic approaches for improving options and outcomes for struggling students and out-of-school youth. The underlying theory of action for the Strategic Assessment Initiative rests on the premise that the types of systemic, programmatic and policy change required to reconnect disengaged youth to quality learning options call for a partnership of key public and community stakeholders that cuts across educational, municipal, and public care sectors. The Initiative further hypothesizes that direct support for community organizing/engagement is critical to link the local partnership to the concerns of those most directly impacted by the systemic and structural causes of persistent race and class inequities in education and career outcomes for young people.

The framework for the strategic investment asked sites to assess their progress- to-date and identify future action in four key areas:

- Improving the capacity to gather, examine, and use data to help inform and guide efforts to improve outcomes for struggling students/out-of-school youth.
- Increasing the investment in and supply of quality educational options for these youth.
- Assessing the policy/funding environment at the local and state level to target policy barriers that impede improved options and outcomes for these youth.
- Building relationships between and mobilizing support of key stakeholders.

Now that the initiative is underway, and each of the cities is deep in the work, it is already possible to see the value to the sites of the strategic assessment process and the four-part framework. With seven months remaining in the strategic assessment grants, the struggling students/out-of-school youth (SS/OSY) workgroup is now beginning to consider how to best maximize the impact of the work that has begun and what the options might be for a follow-on investment strategy. In order to facilitate this process, this document reviews how the framework for the initiative is being operationalized, takes stock of some of the ways the sites have begun to gain traction and considers the leverage possibilities this work is creating. Finally, we present some ideas and trade-offs relating to how follow-on funding for the coming year could be structured.

## **Part I: Strategic Assessment Initiative: Context, Opportunities, and Progress**

### **1. Placing a “Bet” on Systems Work**

One of the first decisions that the SS/OSY workgroup made was to focus collective resources on a small number of cities that had already begun to address the educational and social needs of their struggling students and out-of-school youth, with the goal of helping those cities become more strategic and systemic in their approach to the issues. The workgroup was making a collective “bet” that the existence of actual places with an emerging *system* of educational options, supports and opportunities for struggling students and out-of-school youth would help advance work at both the program and policy levels.

In the last few months, the potential importance of such existence proofs has become increasingly evident. The High School Summit, coordinated by the National Governors’ Association and Achieve, the Action Agenda published by these same organizations, and the very recent RFP to states issued by the NGA (and supported by various members of the SS/OSY Workgroup) is helping to drive the attention of Governors to inadequacies of high schools. Low high school graduation rates are increasingly being used as both a central reason states need to focus on and “do something” about their high schools and are proposed as one of the key measures of whether reform is working.

However, if the last several decades are any indication, state and local officials will be reluctant to tackle the issue of dropouts, at least in part because they do not really know what to do about the problem or believe that there is anything that works, beyond perhaps the scale of a small model program. While model programs can help to counter the “nothing works for this population” pessimism, they are not enough to motivate and guide policymakers at the local or state level.

Early work on the ground suggests that the YTTFG initiative can add a critical missing element by highlighting key strategies that a set of major cities are using to move from piecemeal to systemic solutions in addressing the education and social needs of older, marginalized youth.

### **Report from the Field: Accelerating Systems Change and Targeting Policies**

*Cities have begun to leverage the YTTFG initiative to embed strategies for serving struggling students and out-of-school youth in broader system reform initiatives, both inside and/or outside of the school department:*

- **New York City** and **Philadelphia** are expanding options for struggling students and out-of-school youth through new RFPs that reflect and draw on the work of the partnerships and provide new opportunities for inside/outside partners to collaborate. Capitalizing on the Mayor’s commitment of funds to and recognition of older, out-of-school youth, the NYC Department of Education issued an RFP recently that represents sustainable public investment in diploma granting options for overage/undercredited/out-of-school youth, and, specifically, in CBO’s to provide a range of academic, youth development and career development services within these programs. As a result of the YTTFG initiative elevating the importance of cross-sector collaboration in serving SS/OSY, the Philadelphia School Department recently invited youth-serving municipal and non-profit organizations that are members of the YTTFG partnership to co-design its RFP for new diploma-granting options for overage youth. These organizations are now designing a second RFP that leverages federal/state/municipal dollars for wrap-around services in these schools.

- In **Portland** and **Boston**, where the YTFG partnership includes key leaders of networks of community-based alternative schools/programs, these leaders have leveraged resources and opportunities to tackle challenging quality, accountability, and funding issues. With the goal of positioning their programming as viable options within an emerging portfolio of small schools, these leaders are strategizing with district leaders to align community-based programming with the unfolding high school reform agendas.
- In **San Jose**, the YTFG partnership is working to coordinate the alternative education services split across multiple high school districts and between the districts in the city and county. The partnership has begun work on coordinating data systems to better track which and how many students are getting lost between the cracks, mapping available education options and demonstrating the gap between supply and demand.

*YTFG partnerships are developing strategies to move policy in directions required to improve outcomes for SS/OSY.*

- In **Portland**, the Coalition of Metro-Area Community Schools (CMACS) is working with local and state leaders to help shape policy around accountability for alternatives, especially in regards to how retention and completion rates are measured, reported and used to guide practice and policy.
- In **Philadelphia**, the School Department is looking to the rich data emerging from the YTFG partnership to inform and shape policy on new school and service development for SS/OSY. The database being developed defines the out-of-school youth population by credit attainment and incorporates data on juvenile justice and foster care involvement and homelessness.
- In collaboration with the **San Jose** Mayor's initiative on high school reform, the YTFG partnership has developed a policy team that is surfacing barriers to alternative education and will advance policy recommendations to the County Board of Education and subsequently to the state legislature.

## **2. Establishing a strategic assessment process and partnership**

Another early decision of the SS/OSY Workgroup was to frame the initiative as “strategic assessment”—a stake in the ground between planning and implementation. With this decision came the understanding that carrying out a strategic assessment process at the systemic level would require skillful leadership of a cross-sector partnership—in other words, staffing and sustaining the partnership would be essential to advancing the work. The hope was that sites that were already mobilizing around issues related to struggling students and out-of-school youth would make use of strategic assessment (and of the specific 4-part framework provided by the RFP) as a wedge opportunity to take action on long-standing concerns and do so in a coherent way.

Work in the field indicates that site leads are appreciative of and making good use of the SS/OSY Workgroup's decision to frame the initiative in this way. As one site lead defined strategic assessment, “It's assessment with an eye toward immediate and longer-term action.” In each of the sites, leaders are adapting the process to their context, and using it to develop some long-term targets/goals, while also continuing to move forward on a number of specific actions in areas critical to a strategic approach. As a participant in another site recently articulated, the frame is both coherent and adaptable enough to allow the initiative to be a “place of convergence for a lot of issues” that people have been working on—from the involvement of community-based organizations in small schools, to the pedagogy for struggling students, to the challenge of moving students out of disciplinary schools and juvenile justice back into the education system.

The strategic assessment framework is also helping cities develop a common language for talking with and learning from one another. JFF has helped to broker some initial cross-site conversations in response to particular requests from sites and has used the strategic assessment framework to guide the agenda for the Learning Institute scheduled for June 21-23 in Portland, OR. (see attached draft agenda for the Institute)

### **Report From the Field: Cultivating stakeholder attention and community-involvement**

*The YTFG strategic assessment process has already helped to leverage attention of key stakeholders/funders to expanding educational options for SS/OSY*

- In **Philadelphia**, the strategic assessment process has helped to elevate and strengthen the long-standing cross-sector partnership focused on education options for OSY. The process has brought additional key decision makers to the table and resulted in additional funding from the school district to support new schools for this population.
- In **Boston**, the strategic assessment process (and an Op Ed in Boston Globe) heightened the attention of School Committee to SS/OSY and helped spur a collaboration between the school department and the YTFG partnership on using data to better understand the dropout issue and possible solutions
- In **Portland**, the Oregon Community Foundation, an active member of the city's YTFG partnership, is actively considering ways to interest and inform donors and area funders about the SS/OSY issue.

*In all five sites, the partnership has become the central vehicle for advancing the aims of the strategic assessment process and expanding the work to the broader community. Partnerships provide:*

- Support and political cover for and pressure on key stakeholders and policymakers to support the agenda
- A forum for working out knotty policy, practice, and theory of change issues across systems and sectors that touch this population
- Opportunities for cross-system learning, information-sharing, relationship building and collaboration
- A means for bringing community and youth voice to the conversation/decisions increasing likelihood that changes will have support of the broader community and therefore policymakers

### **3. Taking Advantage of a Moment of Opportunity**

The next twelve to twenty-four months will be critical given a growing interest in high schools at the federal, state, and district levels and the growing attention to graduation and dropout rates as a measure of high school effectiveness. The Struggling Students/OSY Workgroup has the opportunity to help shape and leverage early efforts on the ground and influence state and district action and policy. And, as leaders search for systemic solutions, the Strategic Assessment Initiative cities are well poised to provide exemplars of city-wide collaborative approaches.

Sustaining the “early wins” we’ve seen in the sites and establishing them as potential exemplars for federal/state action will require a consistent level of leadership and advocacy on the issues affecting the options and outcomes for struggling students/out-of-school youth. Although the YTFG strategic assessment grant is small in amount, it is unique among existing initiatives in establishing a vehicle for keeping the particular challenges related to struggling students and out-of-school youth more in the center of the work—whether that be in the creation of small schools, of district redesign, or of quality out-of-school time programming.

It is too soon to know specifically what each site will propose as critical next steps. However, it is possible to identify key areas of activity emerging in one or more sites that will offer potential leverage opportunities for the initiative (see box and attached one-pagers “Building On/Working Towards”). In examining the types of systemic reforms these cities are making, or finding that they have to make in order to serve this population of young people, it will be possible to build out a clearer agenda of what state and local policymakers can and need to do to address barriers to such local activity and to create the impetus for more such activity at the local level where services are delivered.

As states begin to design and roll out their reform plans and the federal government takes increasing interest in systemic approaches to re-engaging disconnected youth, the systems work going on in these cities can serve as an example of the kinds of systemic and intentional effort that need to occur. A visible city approach, resulting in immediate effect on young people’s lives, can help get traction on a broader policy and advocacy agenda on behalf of struggling students and out-of-school youth.

### **Report from the Field: What Sites Are Working Towards**

*Building on the work of the first year, sites will be in position to:*

- Drive attention and resources towards increasing the quantity and quality of educational programming/options for SS/OSY.
- Advocate for policies necessary to support local conditions for incubating and sustaining alternative educational options for SS/OSY.
- Develop and pilot accountability measures for assessing the quality of alternative schools/programs consistent with high expectations for student learning and academic/social development needs of SS/OSY.
- Support increasing capacity of community based organization to serve as partners and/or providers for schools/programs targeted towards SS/OSY.
- Build and strengthen data systems to highlight gaps in services and drive programming.
- Strengthen critical role of community organizations/organizing groups as advocate and external pressure for high school redesign that attends to needs of SS/OSY.

*(see attached one-pagers for more detail)*

## **Part II: Towards a Funding Plan for SS/OSY Workgroup to Consider**

### **Overarching Questions:**

1. Are there ways that you are using/could use your investment in this Initiative to leverage other investments your Foundation makes in this area?
2. If expansion to other sites is a goal, does the workgroup want to pursue the option (discussed a year ago) of selecting exurban or rural sites in the same states as the current cities in order to move towards a city/rural strategy to influence state policy?
3. Is linking the Initiative to NGA's High School Redesign a strategy for leveraging broader state policy influence? For example:
  - a. Does the workgroup want to require year 2 cities (i.e., cities receiving a second year of funding) to include strategies in their plan to take advantage of the NGA initiative if their states are selected to receive NGA funds?And/or:
  - b. Does the workgroup want to intentionally select new sites in NGA-funded states?
4. Are there any aspects of the Initiative design (e.g., underlying premises, key design elements, and 4-part framework) that should be changed or adapted for year 2?
5. Other?

### **Funding Options**

#### **Option 1:**

Continued funding for YTFG partnerships/collaboratives in currently funded cities to continue the work described in this paper, to carry out specific targeted projects, and to support continuing technical assistance/peer learning opportunities.

#### *Tradeoffs:*

- Builds on momentum in current sites, allows sites to build on this year's assessment process to go deeper in implementation where have the most traction and offers opportunity to target and advocate for local/state policy changes across sites
- Does not invest in additional sites, other communities will not have the opportunity to benefit from strategic assessment process and learnings from year 1 cities

#### **Option 2:**

Continued funding for the five original cities and add 2-3 new cities to conduct Year 1 Strategic Assessment Process, completing the original RFP using the 4-part framework.

#### *Tradeoffs:*

- Benefits of continued funding (Option 1) plus expands strategic assessment process to additional sites potentially linking to other national initiatives
- Requires additional funding and/or a reduction of dollars to original sites if level funded

### **Option 3:**

Continued funding for the five original cities and pilot the strategic assessment process in 2-3 rural and/or exurban communities.

#### *Tradeoffs:*

- Benefits of continued funding of original cities, plus tests viability of the approach in non-urban communities; could help to build broader support among key stakeholders for needed policy changes.
- Requires an identification, vetting, and selection process for exurban/rural communities; additional funding and/or reduction in dollars for original sites

### **Option 4:**

Combine any of the first three options with “a la carte funding” that matches end-of-year strategic assessment /recommendations with geographic/strategic priorities of other funders, (e.g. Knight Foundation funds limited number of cities and has \$\$ to implement literacy initiatives for low-literacy dropouts; WS Johnson funds community organizing/advocacy in Bay Area)

#### *Tradeoffs:*

- Allows a second year of funding to original sites and expansion to additional sites; brings in new Foundations increasing investment and visibility
- Requires workgroup to do active outreach/ advocacy among other foundations (both within larger YTFG and beyond) and provide support to sites in garnering support for particular aspects of strategic assessment site plans.

#### *Option 5:*

Other thoughts?

### **Questions Regarding Operating Assumptions**

1. What do the cities that receive continuation funding need to produce for the second grant?
  - a. Are the end-of-year reports/plans sufficient?
  - b. Do we want sites to propose activities for each strand of the 4-part framework or only the strands on which they have the most traction?
  - c. Should we leave this choice up to the sites?
2. If the Initiative is level funded and the workgroup chooses to expand to new sites for Year 2 do we:
  - a. Create a competitive grant process for follow-on funding for Year 1 sites?
  - b. Do across-the-board cuts in grants to all 5 sites?
  - c. Assume that the workgroup will be able to help leverage additional funding for the Initiative (Option 4)?

- d. Require sites to leverage other dollars from local/regional foundations? If yes, how do we account for considerable variations in local dollars available to sites (e.g., Portland vs Philadelphia)?
- 3. Do the core funders intend to pool funding again for year 2?
    - a. If pooled funding is not feasible, is it an option to fund the 5 cities separately, with each core funder granting funds to cities/aspect of the work that align w/ their geographic and strategic concerns?
- 4. What do the core funders require to move the funds through their Foundations?
    - a. What type of proposal is required for year 2 funding?
    - b. What are the funding timelines within the Foundations?
    - c. Does the workgroup want to keep to a similar rollout schedule as year 1?

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## Boston

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### **Building On:**

- Inside-outside partnership of district innovators and school reform organizations guiding high school renewal effort centered on creating a portfolio of small schools, including options designed to address needs of struggling and out-of-school youth
- Organized Youth Service Providers Network of community-based providers committed to grappling with challenging quality, accountability and capacity issues and to improving integration and coordination with school district
- Parent organizing network representing 30+ community organizations and churches, (primarily African American and Latino)
- Productive by 21, a statewide initiative working with leaders of youth-serving state agencies to change policies, programming, and practices that hinder cross-sector collaboration to improve outcomes for disconnected youth
- Strong local and state intermediaries with a long history of collaborating with the school district, mayor, business community, and community service providers

### **Working Towards:**

- Using data on overage and undercredited students to develop an expanded portfolio of high school options, including district-run and community-based diploma granting programs for SS/OSY
- Ensuring that community-based programs are viable and attractive options within the district's emerging portfolio of small schools by strengthening program standards and measures of accountability
- Redirecting and shaping policy discussions around resources for young people left out of education and labor market opportunities by collaborating with the Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies to identify the scope of the problem, its disproportionate impact on low-income and minority youth, and implications for the civic and economic health of the community
- Mobilizing community support for SS/OSY by ensuring that student voices are heard in policy and practice recommendations through focus that target a range of neighborhoods and groups of youth people
- Strengthening the Youth Council's impact by leveraging the YTFG Partnership to become a force for changing resource allocation, policies and practices to improve outcomes for SS/OSY

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## New York City

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### **Building On:**

- Momentum of NYC Secondary Reform, particularly small school development (e.g. New Century High School Initiative), using a partnership model (e.g. new schools designed in partnership with a community partner/cultural organization compete in RFP process)
- Close collaboration of DOE and New Visions (intermediary org.) in carrying out and supporting this effort and of DOE, NV, and Youth Development Institute in developing partnership component
- Evolving Multiple Pathways to Graduation strategy leading to systemic DOE investment in new school models/options for overage, undercredited, and out-of-school youth
- Group of community-based organizations with history of joining together to influence policies that impact youth
- Capacity building through YDI's Young Adult Capacity Initiative for over a dozen community-based organizations that serve or potentially could serve out-of-school youth

### **Working Towards**

- Intensified focus on improving graduation rates and post-secondary success of marginalized students both within broader high school reform agenda and by developing new models for overage/under-credited/out-of-school youth as part of a Multiple Pathways to Graduation strategy
- Engagement of (and sustainable public funding for) community-based organizations to provide a range of academic and youth development support services in partnership with educational models for overage/under-credited/out of school youth
- Rationalized, more transparent contracting procedures, regulations, processes, etc. for CBO's and others partnering with and providing services to the high schools.
- Professional development (e.g. including best practices and effective models) to build capacity of Multiple Pathways to Graduation schools and programs
- Increased public support for expanded options/multiple pathways through development of a media strategy and strong case that multiple pathways to graduation are critical to economic/ and workforce development of NYC
- Cost analysis of multiple pathways models to demonstrate the feasibility of these models and returns on investment in them

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## Philadelphia

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### **Building on:**

- A long-standing cross-sector partnership that has leveraged multiple systems and funding streams to deliver integrated comprehensive programming and reconnect youth to skills, credentials, and employment
- Several years of development of sophisticated data systems and cross-sector agreements that are poised to yield in-depth information about out-of-school youth, which can be leveraged to drive both services and programming/system design
- A school department that is placing heavy emphasis on both using data to drive new school development and creating new options
- Community-based organizations that have successfully advocated on behalf of youth in the public schools
- A state-wide and local initiative focused on reintegrating court-involved youth into schools/community

### **Working towards:**

- A data system that gives a complete picture of out-of-school youth, sorted by credit accumulation and incorporating data from multiple agencies, and begins to argue for different kind of braided funding/services (for both new schools and more comprehensive services)
- Ensuring that struggling students and out-of-school youth are considered as central to the district's high school reform agenda, and ensuring that outside partners are engaged in new small school development for this population
- Strengthened alternative system that features high-quality literacy practices in alternative programming, and use of effective literacy practices for struggling students in "regular" high schools
- Better alignment between alternative programs, schools for adjudicated youth, and school department, so that youth do not lose time/credits in transfer
- Development of a network of programs serving out-of-school youth for peer learning and advocacy

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## Portland

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### **Building on:**

- Reform-minded district leadership, including new superintendent and four new school board members backed by business and community leaders.
- Well-organized and supported network of alternative schools with commitment to address quality, accountability and capacity issues and to improve integration and coordination with the school district.
- Nationally recognized model of juvenile justice reform that combines detention, detention alternatives, intervention and probation and has reduced racial disparities.
- Organizing/advocacy partner, Stand for Children, that has successfully combined community organizing with state level advocacy and LEF (Portland Schools Foundation) that convenes key leaders and stakeholders, and has invested in leadership to move school district reform.
- Innovative state policy that allows funding to follow young people to community-based alternatives and supports credits for proficiencies

### **Working Towards:**

- A redesigned district that realigns central office resources to support a portfolio of high school options with multiple pathways to postsecondary success.
- Strengthening program elements, standards and measures of accountability of community-based alternatives to ensure their place as viable options within the district's emerging high school redesign.
- Creating a comprehensive statistical portrait-- drawing on data sets across youth service systems-- of youth in need of services, and the gap between needed and available services to guide policy and practices changes.
- Strengthening cross-system collaboration, programming, and policy advocacy among education, juvenile justice, workforce, social services /community service providers through presentations, forums, joint working groups, and collaborative planning.
- Ensuring that youth and parents, especially those in the minority community, have influence in the unfolding high school reform.
- Building ownership for policy agenda and brokering support among current and potential allies within the local high-level leadership to improve outcomes for SS/OSY

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## San Jose

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### **Building On:**

- Cross-agency commitment to act on behalf of vulnerable youth under city-wide *Blueprint for Youth*
- Decade of experience with successful cross sector collaboration under Mayor's Gang Prevention Task Force now being directed to efforts to increase quantity and quality of learning environments for youth
- Capacity of CBO's to fill gaps in services and CBO experience partnering with school systems to connect youth to educational opportunities via 21st Century program
- An array of alternative schools operated by CBO's to meet the needs of youth with academic and/or life circumstance challenges
- Community activism/organizing by PACT and other groups to demand quality alternative education for youth and adequate information about options for parents/guardians
- Initial efforts to re-organize/improve district-run alternative schools so not a "dumping ground" and coordinate curriculum in district and county alternative schools so students can transfer between them

### **Working Towards:**

- Aligning the YTFG work with Mayor's high school initiative so that needs of all youth and multiple programs/providers remains an explicit part of the vision
- Developing a web based system on available alternative education options (districts, county, community providers) for information and referral and to track student/family demand/need
- Coordinating data systems of district and county to map available ed options by eligibility criteria, demonstrate demand vs. supply, and to monitor student transfers between district and county schools
- Developing a "network" of alternative ed providers (district, county, community) for professional and curriculum development and quality control
- Building commitment within district leadership (Superintendents and Board) to support quality alternative education and address issues in traditional schools leading to low promotion power for Hispanic students
- Mobilizing support for appropriate alternative education options through documentation of youth and family struggles to find such options
- Increasing mobilization efforts to push County Board of Education and district School Boards to take responsibility for quantity and quality of alternative education options for youth