



Youth Transition Funders Group

# Multiple Pathways to Graduation

A COLLABORATIVE PHILANTHROPIC INITIATIVE

The Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) is a collaboration of national and regional funders working in partnership to improve the lives of older youth who become disconnected from schools, the workforce, communities, and their families. YTFG funders work together to address policy and program gaps, and create critical reforms to improve the lives of young people who would otherwise be alone in finding their way toward productive adulthood. YTFG's Multiple Pathways to Graduation work group is addressing the high school dropout crisis because a diploma is a critical step toward college and careers.

## BACKGROUND

The foundations that make up the Multiple Pathways to Graduation work group—including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the William Penn Foundation, the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, and the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation—are working together to create more powerful strategies to increase graduation rates.

After extensive research, it became clear to us that the youth employment system, which funds the second chances programs, had been so severely under-funded for years that it could no longer serve most of the eligible youth. Additionally, research from the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that students who were not graduating from high school were being left further behind than ever—dropping out of school sooner, and with fewer credits and skills than in the past. Youth without a high school diploma weren't qualified to become part of an economy that demanded a much more educated and skilled workforce than ever before. We decided to focus on creating a major policy shift in which the education system would take responsibility for graduating *all* students.

YTFG funded the establishment of the Strategic Assessment Initiative to help cities create sustainable strategies to improve outcomes for struggling students and out-of-school youth. Additionally, Jobs for the Future provides leadership as an intermediary convening the sites, supporting peer exchange, and delving deeper into policy issues. Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, OR, and San Jose were chosen to receive grants as part of the Initiative because these cities were clearly ready to shift from piecemeal programs to systemic approaches. Furthermore, Washington, DC and Las Vegas were provided planning support that has successfully leveraged local dollars and public will.

## COORDINATED INVESTMENT STRATEGY

YTFG's coordinated investment strategy is highly informed by the progress of the cities, all of which have developed sustainable efforts by having multiple points of leadership—district, municipal, and community. The investments of all YTFG members are directed toward opportunities that can expedite the process of change. To coordinate and guide our work, we use a four-part framework which requires that investments:

1. *Use data to drive the reform process;*
2. *Mobilize stakeholders and policymakers to generate demand for increasing graduation rates;*
3. *Expand and diversify a district's portfolio of schools to meet the needs of students, both in and out of school, who are off-track to graduation; and*
4. *Analyze and address policy and funding conditions that shape students' educational opportunities and the availability of high quality schools.*

YTFG reflects annually on investments, reviews lessons learned, critiques our grantmaking, and seeks opportunities to expand the multiple pathways to graduation effort.

## UPDATES FROM THE CITIES

### BOSTON

The Youth Transitions Task Force (YTTF), a collaboration of more than 30 organizations, generated demand for the Boston Public Schools (BPS) to focus on the dropout crisis through the release of “Too Big To Be Seen,” a research report that documents the size and shape of the crisis. In response, the BPS began a deep analysis of the educational trajectories of the students who weren’t graduating, and an assessment of the quality of and funding for alternative schools. The Boston Private Industry Council, a business-led intermediary organization, hired two former dropouts to reach out to youth to find out why they left school and what happens when they reconnect with educational pathways. This “action research,” is providing the coalition with information on which it is basing more fine-grained recommendations to the school system and its community partners. A multi-organizational collaboration is supporting youth in the juvenile justice system to increase their academic skills and credits while in detention, and make smooth transitions back into school.

The YTTF published “impact research,” documenting the social and fiscal cost of the dropout crisis. The release of this information was dramatic because of the number and level of stakeholders it attracted to the campaign. In fact, the YTTF was able to work with Senator Edward Augustus (D-Worcester) to file state legislation that:

- > *Sets a goal of reducing the dropout rate by half,*
- > *Establishes similar dropout coalitions in districts with high dropout rates, and*
- > *Supports funding for early indicator systems, alternative pathways to graduation, and outreach to dropouts.*

The next steps for the YTTF are to pass the state legislation; work with the BPS on a comprehensive dropout prevention and recovery plan; and support federal legislation such as the Graduation Promise Act.<sup>1</sup>

For more information: Boston Private Industry Council, [www.bostonpic.org/youth/g.htm](http://www.bostonpic.org/youth/g.htm)

### NEW YORK CITY

In establishing an Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG), New York City’s Department of Education signaled its commitment to addressing the dropout crisis. With support from consulting firm the Parthenon Group, the OMPG completed a groundbreaking analysis of students who did not graduate. Their discovery that students who became off-track to graduation were essentially the same group of students who did not graduate moved the OMPG and its partners to expand the capacity of the school district to serve off-track students.

The Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, in collaboration with the city and its community partners, has made significant progress toward improving opportunities for all of the city’s young people to graduate by:

- > *Establishing Learning to Work programs that provide career experience and counseling,*
- > *Designing Young Adult Borough Centers for older students missing the credits they need to graduate,*

---

<sup>1</sup> The Graduation Promise Act would provide states with funding to improve existing high schools, develop high schools for struggling students and dropouts, and increase graduation rates.

- > *Increasing the number of transfer schools to serve an additional 1,500 students, with a focus on younger students who have fallen off track to graduation, and*
- > *Redesigning GED programs to offer improved instruction, career services, and counseling so that students are prepared for the transition to college and careers upon the completion of the GED.*

In addition, New York City's Youth Development Institute has developed the Community Education Pathways to Success Initiative (CEPS). CEPS is focused on building the capacity of community-based organizations to enable youth who have dropped out of school with low skills to significantly improve their reading and math skills.

The efforts in NYC continue to be very focused on using data effectively to improve services for students. New Visions for Public Schools has developed, and supports schools in using, an "on-track" metric. Working with students, parents, and teachers, the on-track indicator is designed to ensure that everyone is focused on having students in class and accumulating the necessary credits to get to graduation.

For more information: The Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, [schools.nyc.gov/Offices/DYD/OMP/default.htm](http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/DYD/OMP/default.htm) and Youth Development Institute, [www.ydinstitute.org](http://www.ydinstitute.org)

## PHILADELPHIA

Philadelphia is the only city to date that has engaged in cross-system research that looked at the educational trajectories of all students who did not graduate, as well as taking a closer look at students who are in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The research has provided the foundation for a blue print for a multiple pathways to graduation system in Philadelphia, which includes:

- > *Expanding the number of accelerated schools that serve students with few credits*
- > *Developing a "bridge" program for students who are reading below a sixth grade level*
- > *Working with the School District to enhance the Career Technical Education offerings—specifically for youth who are in the juvenile justice system or otherwise disconnected*
- > *Creating a one-stop, re-engagement center to facilitate a youth's re-engagement and placement back into a public school setting*

In addition to ensuring that the needs of disconnected youth are integrated into the School District's high school reform plans, upcoming priorities for the collaborative include:

- > *Supporting the city's division of social services as they implement recommendations in various city departments to better track and support the educational attainment of the youth they serve; and*
- > *Developing a professional peer network for alternative education providers to grow the capacity of organizations in Philadelphia to provide high-quality, alternative educational options.*

The work of the Philadelphia Collaborative has been the catalyst for the creation of a statewide network of nine "Youth Transition" cities funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry.

For more information: Project U-Turn, [www.projectuturn.net](http://www.projectuturn.net)

## PORTLAND

Understanding that increasing graduation rates is more than any one organization can do, Portland's Connected by 25 is an effort made up of more than 37 community leaders, educators, business leaders, and policy makers. It is implementing research-driven initiatives and coordinating citywide efforts to transform individual programs for 14–16 year olds into a more strategic, complementary, and effective networks of services. Their accomplishments include:

- > *Developing a greater understanding of how and when students drop out through a partnership between the school districts and the Bridgespan Group, a non-profit organization*
- > *Creating Coalition of Metro Area Community-based Schools, a stellar alternative schools network that has schools run by community-based organizations working with school districts to recover close to 1,500 students per year*
- > *Supporting off-track eighth graders in their transition to high school through a collaboration with Open Meadows, an alternative school, Roosevelt High School, and the school district*
- > *Furthering the integration of alternative high schools into the district's Office of High Schools, further creating a cohesive system for struggling students*
- > *Utilizing young people as advocates to share their experiences in a video called "Unseen"*
- > *Focusing on improving the achievement of Native youth by opening the NAYA Early College Academy, an alternative school run by Portland's Native American Youth and Family Center*

Research commissioned by Connected by 25 identified important academic indicators that accurately predict whether or not a student will graduate. From this research it's clear that eighth grade and ninth grade achievement matters most. Parents, teachers, and community partners are now focusing interventions as early as ninth grade, before it is too late.

For more information: Connected by 25, [www.connectedby25.org](http://www.connectedby25.org)

## SAN JOSE

San Jose's Alternative Education Collaborative (AEC) is a multi-agency network advocating for, and working on behalf of, at-risk and struggling students. The collaborative has established positive working relationships with more than 40 community-based organizations, county service agencies, the city government, the County Office of Education, thirty-two local school districts, law enforcement, and faith-based entities.

In addition, a critical component to the effort in San Jose is lead by People Acting in Community Together (PACT), a community organization, which has led the effort to raise awareness and generate demand for attention to the dropout crisis. Organizing parents and students, PACT continues to create community awareness and pressure to expand the number of seats in alternative education programs.

One focal point of the effort has been supporting the Santa Clara County Juvenile Court Education Task Force (JET) initiative focusing on improving educational outcomes for foster care youth. In its first year, this effort is working to build cross-system cooperation and implement a consolidated youth data system to ensure portability of records, and improved access and tracking of student performance. AEC's partnership with JET lays the groundwork for needed systemic change. The initiative's focus on a specific target population enabled service

systems to work together to overcome institutional barriers. These various service agencies collaborated on operational solutions, and developed and executed reform.

AEC has also focused on raising the quality of instruction in alternative education classrooms, for example, a partnership with University of California, Santa Cruz and the Santa Clara County Office of Education to develop a teacher certificate program based on approaches that are student-focused.

For more information: The Greater San Jose Alternative Education Collaborative, [www.getbacktoschool.org](http://www.getbacktoschool.org)

## LESSONS LEARNED: CHALLENGING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

The work being done to establish multiple pathways to graduation has uncovered data that challenges many assumptions about our education system and our students.

### **Myth #1: Students drop out because they are lazy or not motivated.**

**Reality: *Most dropouts are extremely persistent in their efforts to complete secondary education.*** A study tracking approximately 25,000 students over the course of 12 years made clear that the perception of dropouts as unmotivated is not supported by the facts. Nearly 60 percent of the youth who drop out of high school eventually earn a high school credential—in most cases a GED certificate.<sup>2</sup> What's more, almost half of those that earn their credential enroll in college.

Almost universally, young people who drop out of school express in hindsight great remorse for having left high school and a strong interest in re-entering school. Most dropouts keep trying to earn a diploma, often cycling in and out of schools and programs several times.<sup>3</sup>

### **Myth #2: Socioeconomic characteristics define who drops out.**

**Reality: *School-related indicators are a much better predictor of who will drop out.*** For decades we invested in research looking at the socioeconomic characteristics of who drops out which, not surprisingly, reinforced the notion that poor students and students of color, specifically black and Latino students, were most likely to dropout. We are now finding, from research in NYC, Philadelphia, Portland, and Chicago, that school indicators, such as course failure, attendance, and credit accumulation, are more powerful predictors than race or income level. The significance of this research is that it empowers districts, schools, and parents to intervene early if students start to slip off the path to graduation.

### **Myth #3: Four years is enough time to complete a high school education.**

**Reality: *Many high school students take more than four years to graduate.*** In Philadelphia the on-time (four year) graduation rate ranges from 45–52% for the graduating classes of 2000 through 2005. The six-year graduation rate range is higher, from 54–58%. Some students enter high school with low literacy levels and need time to build skills and complete requirements for graduation, while others must temporarily interrupt their education to work or take care of their families.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Making Good on a Promise: What Policymakers Can Do to Support the Educational Persistence of Dropouts, by C. Almeida, C. Johnson, and A. Steinberg. Jobs for the Future (2006)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

## SUGGESTIONS FOR INVESTMENTS

**Dive for Data:** The most important investment a foundation can make is to support a district and its research partners in using data to segment the populations of students who are not graduating. We simply cannot improve graduation rates if we do not understand which students are falling off the pathway to graduation and why. Although costs will vary based on the quality of the information systems, an investment of \$300,000–\$500,000 can make a significant impact.

**Engage Stakeholders:** Improving graduation rates requires both an inside and an outside strategy. District leadership has a critical role in creating options for students who are off-track to graduation. At the same time, advocacy groups and community organizations have important parts to play. Support efforts with community, faith-based, and youth organizations that help them learn about the issues, sustain political pressure for change, and guide decisions to ensure that the efforts to create multiple pathways to graduation produce real change, not a second-class second-chance system.

**Align Social Services:** Youth involved in other agencies such as foster care or juvenile justice are at risk of falling off-track to graduation. It's important that those agencies are involved in the work of creating multiple paths to graduation. Sponsor strategic coordination among city and county services, social service and mental health providers, and workforce development programs to improve access to education for youth who are involved in other agencies.

**Diversify the Portfolio of Schools:** Leading cities are finding that they need to expand the diversity of the schools and programs available to students. Some cities are creating programs to help older students complete their necessary credits, while others have found that they need schools to help younger students who are dropping out in ninth and tenth grade. There is a great need to investigate cost-effective methods to engage students and accelerate their learning.

**Advocacy Matters:** Leaders in efforts to create multiple pathways to graduation have identified a number of key policy issues that must be addressed to improve graduation rates and recover dropouts. Consider investments that enable community organizations and advocates to become familiar with the issues, shape research and communication strategies, and build coalitions for policy development.

---

<sup>4</sup> Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000-2005. R. Balfanz and R Neild. 2007. [www.projectturn.net](http://www.projectturn.net)

## RESOURCES

### YOUTH TRANSITION FUNDERS GROUP, [WWW.YTFG.ORG](http://WWW.YTFG.ORG)

The Youth Transition Funders Group is a network of grantmakers whose mission is to help all youth make a successful transition to adulthood by age 25. We focus our work in three areas: foster care, juvenile justice, and multiple pathways to graduation.

Visit [www.ytfg.org/mpgresources](http://www.ytfg.org/mpgresources) for examples of how cities have designed their analysis, information on different models of alternative high schools, and policy issues and accomplishments.

### JOBS FOR THE FUTURE, [WWW.JFF.ORG](http://WWW.JFF.ORG)

See “Youth Transitions” under “Projects”

Jobs for the Future is a nonprofit research, consulting, and advocacy organization working to ensure that all young people have a quality high school and postsecondary education, and that all adults have the skills needed to hold jobs that pay enough to support a family.

### ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL INITIATIVE, [WWW.AHSI.INFO](http://WWW.AHSI.INFO)

The Alternative High School Initiative is a network of youth development organizations committed to creating educational opportunities for young people for whom traditional school settings have not been successful.

### THE CONSORTIUM ON CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH, [CCSR.UCHICAGO.EDU](http://CCSR.UCHICAGO.EDU)

The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago conducts research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. *Recommended reading:* “What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public Schools”



207 East Ohio Street, No. 392  
Chicago, Illinois 60611  
312.276.4365 • [www.ytfg.org](http://www.ytfg.org) • [info@ytfg.org](mailto:info@ytfg.org)