

How Philanthropy Is Working Together to Help
All of America's Youth Connect by Age 25

safe passage



Youth Transition
Funders Group

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OUR VISION

Although their paths may vary greatly, all young people need to arrive at the same place: ready to work or take advantage of college-level education with the skills they need to participate fully in the workplace, become parents or assume family responsibilities, and participate in the civic life of their communities. Further, they need opportunities and support systems in place. Unfortunately, our society has no coherent social or public policy approach to support young people as they negotiate these transitions—and many vulnerable youth are not given the chance to do so successfully. Our vision is of a society dedicated to providing young people with the skills, supports, and opportunities to transition into meaningful and productive adult lives

chapter 1:

why all of us should care about america's older youth

“The one million students who drop out of high school each year cost our nation more than \$260 billion dollars. That’s in lost wages, lost taxes, and lost productivity over their lifetimes...When you lose a million students every year that has a tremendous impact on our economy. And it represents the American Dream...denied.”

Margaret Spellings, U.S. Secretary of Education¹

Most young people make the transition from adolescence to adulthood with the support of their families, communities, and schools. However, 5.4 million of our nation’s most vulnerable youth—youth aging out of foster care, teenage parents, out-of-school students and those in danger of dropping out, and youth involved in the juvenile justice system—lack the services and social supports they need to succeed as productive workers, responsible parents, and engaged citizens.²

The fate of these young people impacts us all.

Today, at least a quarter of students starting ninth grade does not graduate from high school on time. In many of our nation’s high-poverty districts, only half of the students of color who attend public high schools graduate. Many youth without a diploma face a lifetime of dead-end jobs, poor benefits, and reduced earnings.³

While youth violence and crime rates are down, the number of young people involved in the juvenile justice system is up. In the 1990s, the national juvenile arrest rate for major violent offenses went down by 33 percent, while the number of juveniles confined in correctional institutions went up by 48 percent. Our nation spends more than \$1 billion annually to lock young people in poorly run facilities where they receive little education, job training, or counseling.⁴

In addition, each year, 20,000 young people leave foster care and many do so

¹ Margaret Spellings, Secretary of Education, September, 2005; available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2005/09/09282005.html>.

² Andrew Sum et al, “Left Behind in the Labor Market: Labor Market Problems of the Nation’s Out-of-School Young Adult Populations” (Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, 2002), p. 11; available at http://www.nupr.neu.edu/2-03/left_behind.pdf.

³ See Michael Wald and Tia Martinez, “Connected by 25: Improving the Life Chances of the Country’s Most Disadvantaged 14–24-Year-Olds” (Stanford University, 2003); available at www.ytfg.org. Also see Gary Orfield et al, “Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis” (The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2004); available at <http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/LosingOurFuture.pdf>.

⁴ For more information, go to the website of Building Blocks for Youth, an initiative to reduce the overrepresentation and disparate treatment of youth of color in the justice system, while promoting fair, rational, and effective juvenile justice policies. Fact sheets are available at <http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/issues>.

without the transitional assistance they need to get an education, a job, or a home. Many become teen parents struggling to complete their education and support their new families.⁵

Nationwide, this means that as many as one in five young people will become disconnected from school, work, and family at some point between the ages of 14 and 24.⁶ Research shows that youth who become disconnected from their support systems or who are unable to finish their education are likely to carry social, emotional, and physical scars from their “lost time” on the streets. As a result, they are more likely to use drugs, engage in criminal behavior, and end up unemployed or dependent on welfare.

WHAT ARE THE COSTS OF INACTION?

Here are some startling realities:

- Over the next decade, a new generation of children will be born to young parents whose ability to provide for them financially will be severely compromised. Research shows that the children of these youth will be at risk of many of the same negative outcomes experienced by their parents.
- Every year our nation loses a sizable portion of the potential labor market as young people’s lives are challenged by interruptions in education, early parent-

hood, and involvement in systems of public care. As a result, billions of dollars in earnings and tax revenue that could flow into our economy are wasted.

- A large number of court-involved youth—even if convicted of minor crimes—will lose their rights to vote and thus to participate in the civic voice of many American communities.

As a society, we cannot afford the high costs that result from ignoring the plight of struggling youth. In order to keep our economy strong, our communities safe and vibrant, and our young people on track, we must work together to create opportunities to connect all youth to the education, employment, and support they need to transition into a successful adult life.

Fortunately, a host of social ills—from violence and urban decay to persistent poverty and homelessness to lost wages and the high costs of incarceration—can be prevented by investing in cost-effective community supports that help young people who are, or who are in danger of becoming, disconnected. The strategies outlined in this publication highlight some of the ways we can make more prudent and effective investments in our young people.

⁵ Michael Wald and Tia Martinez, p. 23.

⁶ Ibid., p. 3.



chapter 2: the ytfg vision: connected by 25

“Our focused attention on older youth insists upon the inherent value of all youth, no matter how bumpy their roads to successful adulthood.”

Lisa McGill, Director, YTFG

The Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) began in 2001 as a funders’ network committed to ensuring that all young people between the ages of 14 and 24 become “Connected by 25” to caring adults, institutions, and support systems that will enable them to succeed throughout adulthood.

YTFG members work together to help America’s youth achieve five critical outcomes:

- Educational achievement in preparation for career and civic participation, including a high school diploma, post-secondary degree, and/or vocational training certificate.
- Gainful employment and/or access to career training to achieve life-long economic success.
- Connections to a positive support system—namely guidance and trusting relationships with family members and caring adults, as well as access to health, counseling, and mental health services.

- The ability to become a responsible and nurturing parent.
- The capacity to participate in the civic life of one’s community.

YTFG COLLABORATIVE SUPPORT FOR CRITICAL POINTS OF TRANSITION

While a set of complex conditions often contributes to the reasons that any one young person is unable to establish meaningful social and economic links by age 25, research shows that there are at least three primary transition points at which many youth become disconnected. YTFG has focused its efforts on increasing philanthropic investments for youth who experience transitions that put them at high-risk of long-term disconnection from families and communities:

1 Interrupted Education. Youth who leave school prematurely are at very high risk of long-term disconnection and persistent poverty, especially when they are given no opportunity to re-engage in learning and complete their degrees. Conversely, nearly all youth who attend college—even for a short time—have better access to economic opportunity.

2 Court Involvement.

Incarcerated youth, many of whom are detained for “status” or other nonviolent offenses, face an especially high risk of long-term disconnection. Recidivism rates for youth are more than 50 percent, and incarceration reduces the odds that a young person will complete school and have favorable employment prospects.

3 Foster Care Placement.

Youth placed in foster care as teenagers are an especially vulnerable population. Most lack much-needed familial and social support, do not have adequate access to educational opportunities, or suffer from mental and physical health problems or substance abuse. Without adequate transition assistance, many foster youth drop out of school and/or become involved in the justice system.

The next few chapters explore the emerging philanthropic investments of YTFG members, part of an effort to address the challenges of youth who are out of school, involved with the courts, or in foster care. Each of these Connected by 25 investments is part of a larger initiative to address the critical transition points mentioned earlier and to identify specific strategies to help foundations, policy-makers, and elected officials help young people stay on the right path to successful adulthood.

YTFG GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Despite the diverse perspectives of YTFG grantmakers, our members and partners are in strong agreement that the following factors should guide philanthropic investments in our communities:

- **Youth Development Principles:** Integrating well-tested principles of youth development that have proven successful in working with at-risk youth.
- **Access to Education:** Promoting educational access, learning, high school graduation, and flexible postsecondary options for all young people, especially those in public care.
- **Promoting Physical and Mental Health:** Supporting the physical and mental health of young people as critical components of their ability to survive, thrive, and transition successfully to adulthood from school, foster care, the juvenile justice system, and other institutions.
- **Lifelong Connection to Family and Caretakers:** Advocating on behalf of policies and strategies that facilitate and strengthen the connections between youth and their birth, foster, or extended families.

chapter 3:

creating multiple pathways to college and careers

“We know the education pipeline is leaking—and we know where those who fall out are likely to end up. At best, they gain tenuous footholds on the low rungs of the economic ladder. At worst, they wind up in prison or dead.”

Kevin Walker, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

High school education is critical if young people are to stay on course and succeed in life. And yet, despite our best efforts to improve elementary and middle school education, fewer than 70 percent of our nation’s students graduate from high school in four years, and many out-of-school youth do not have the tenth-grade educational level required to participate in GED prep courses.

The problem is far from new, and it cannot be explained away by criticizing No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or the standards movement. However, it is safe to say that school systems that are adapting new methods of serving student populations and responding to federal mandates need to do more to ensure that all young people receive an adequate education.

THE YTFG COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Our Connected by 25 collaboration on education reform was launched in 2004 to help cities and other communities better understand what it takes to stop the stream of youth out of the school system and to help them recover those who have become disconnected.

Led by the YTFG Out-of-School Youth/Struggling Students Work Group, YTFG identified a group of cities in 2003 that were making progress in their efforts to re-engage students whose education had been interrupted. Thanks to the leadership and learning of these cities, YTFG has identified and begun to invest in seven promising practices for connecting struggling students and out-of-school youth:

1 Early Intervention.

Although it is impossible to predict exactly which children will drop out of school, recent research indicates that the transition between the eighth and ninth grades is critical. Early-intervention efforts should identify students who need a helping hand before they reach

high school to ensure that they make the transition; provide accelerated learning and extra academic support for students whose skills are not sufficient; invest heavily in developmental supports to ensure that students perceive themselves as students and have the internal motivation to learn; and provide better system coordination and communication to make sure that students are well served.

2 Adequate Supply of Choice-Based, High-Quality Alternatives.

In many cities and regions, there are simply not enough “slots” in existing alternative programs to serve the number of students seeking these options. Further, some of the existing alternative programs are not up to the task of effectively educating students, which does not serve youth well in the long run. To remedy the situation, communities must determine the mix and scope of programming needed to meet the educational needs of youth. This will require schools and communities to fully budget for educating all of their youth and to ensure that all new and existing pathways are of high quality. To accomplish this, schools must develop quality standards, student performance benchmarks, and program evaluation tools.

3 Shared Responsibility and Systemic Coordination.

Adults must move beyond concerns for students in “their school” or “their program” to a broader, more inclusive view that encompasses concern for every child in the community. A perspective of shared responsibility is a critical part of marshalling the resources and the public support needed to prepare all students for college and work. Sharing responsibility will also result in the sharing of data and information about youth.

4 Capacity to Refer and Re-Enroll.

The doors to alternative pathways must “open both ways” through flexible referral and re-enrollment policies. Students should have a choice in selecting the setting that best meets their needs. Students should also be able to re-enroll in either their local high school or alternative schools in a timely fashion without bureaucratic barriers.

5 Credit for Proficiency.

Students with interrupted education must have ways to accelerate their learning. Reliance on “seat time” to generate course credits is one of the greatest barriers for struggling students and out-of-school youth. It is critical that

districts and states work together to create strategies for accelerating learning and credits.

6

Resource Allocation and Financial Incentives.

The tracking, budgeting, and allocation methods used in most schools obscure the real costs per child and shortchange the students who need the most assistance. Through fiscal coordination

and strategic budgeting approaches, schools can plan for increasing enrollment, school holding power, and dropout recovery. Moreover, financial incentives must be created to make it worthwhile for schools and alternative programs to succeed with the students under their care. For example, if local high schools improve their ability to meet the needs of all learners, they should receive funds

EARLY LESSONS FROM THE CONNECTED BY 25 INVESTMENTS IN EDUCATION REFORM: LEVERAGING A COLLABORATIVE FRAMEWORK TO CULTIVATE STAKEHOLDER ATTENTION

The YTFG strategic assessment process has already helped to leverage attention of key stakeholders/funders to expanding educational options for out-of-school youth and struggling students.

- In Boston, the strategic assessment process (and an opinion editorial in the *Boston Globe*) heightened the attention paid by the School Committee to struggling students and out-of-school youth 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.
- The Oregon Community Foundation, an active member of Portland's YTFG partnership, has begun to identify donors likely to have an interest in supporting initiatives for struggling students and out-of-school youth and is planning efforts to inform donors about the challenges facing this group of young people.


- In San Jose, the demands of parents and youth for quality alternative education has brought the County Superintendent, the County Board of Education, and District Superintendents to the table, and these stakeholders have begun to take steps to acknowledge responsibility for increasing the quality and quantity of alternative education slots for youth in San Jose.
- In Philadelphia, a retrospective longitudinal analysis of dropouts revealed critical warning signs as early as the sixth grade—red flags for which an appropriate response could potentially reduce the scope and nature of the problems faced in high school.

In all five sites, the collaborative framework of the work has become the central vehicle for advancing the aims of the strategic assessment process, cultivating stakeholder attention, and building community involvement.

YTFG Snapshot

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS: SCHOOLS THAT MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUTH IN TRANSITION

Although the phrase “alternative school” often refers to disciplinary schools, the original idea was for these schools to be student centered. One size does not fit all, especially when trying to support students who face substantial challenges. Here are just a few examples of schools or models funded by YTFG members that are designed around the needs of youth:

- **ALTA Academy, Houston:** Understanding that youth may need to balance work, family, and school, ALTA offers three four-hour sessions per day. Students focus on two courses at a time over nine-week sessions. This process provides them with timely feedback and a sense of successfully advancing toward their goals.
 - **Diploma Plus:** Schools that adopt the Diploma Plus model use a competency-based approach to teaching and learning so that students become responsible for their own achievement. In order to support students in the transition to the next stage of their lives, the final year is focused on coursework at community college, internships, and participation in community service projects.
 - **Manhattan Comprehensive Night and Day School:** Manhattan Night and Day Comprehensive, an integrated-services model, serves 800 older, nontraditional students ages 17 to 21. Students can attend either night or day classes, while working full-time and attending to other responsibilities. More than 90 percent of seniors graduate; 60 percent go to college immediately; virtually all others finish high school already employed.
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- **Maya Angelou Charter School (MACS), Washington, DC:** Originally designed for court-involved youth, MACS integrates a strong humanities curriculum to engage youth in critical thinking, provides vocational and youth leadership opportunities, and offers mental health and other social services.
 - **Performance Learning Centers:** Developed by Communities in Schools, in Georgia, the Centers offer individualized instruction, a self-paced on-line curriculum, a businesslike learning environment, specially trained and certified teachers, internships, mentors, job training, and dual enrollment in local colleges and technical programs.



traditionally allocated to alternative programs. Conversely, funding should “follow the student” when a community-based, accredited program offers older students a second chance to complete high school requirements.

7

Student Advocacy.

For many out-of-school youth and struggling students, obtaining a transcript, getting a referral for special education testing, or requesting a letter of recommendation from a former employer is an overwhelming task. These young people need knowledgeable adult advocates to help them negotiate the public and educational support systems.

CONNECTED BY 25: INVESTMENTS IN EDUCATION REFORM

As a result of the success of the preliminary work among the YTFG national and regional foundations, local intermediaries, and national organizations, YTFG is continuing investments in at least five cities as lighthouse sites for a community-wide systemic reform aimed at dropout prevention and recovery. Boston, New York, Portland (OR), Philadelphia, and San Jose are focusing on the following four areas:

- Using data across systems to better understand why and when youth are disconnecting from school and to

develop early identification systems that can respond proactively to the needs of struggling students.

- Assessing policy and funding conditions that impact the development and sustainability of alternative learning options.
- Increasing the supply and quality of learning options for struggling students and out-of-school youth.
- Mobilizing stakeholder and policymaker support for developing and sustaining learning options.

Our vision is to build on the successes of YTFG lighthouse sites to coordinate longer-term investments that improve educational options and outcomes for all young people by creating multiple pathways to college and careers. YTFG expects to expand our Connected by 25 investment in education reform to additional communities in the near future.

chapter 4:

promoting opportunities and alternatives to incarceration

“Perhaps the greatest tragedy is that when people are incarcerated, their voices are suddenly missing from the community and from conversations about their destiny.”

*Victoria Samartino, Founder and Director, Voices UnBroken
(a New York City youth program)*

Nationwide, more than 100,000 teenagers, two-thirds of whom are youth of color, are held in custody at costs ranging from \$100 to more than \$300 per day. While some are serious or chronic offenders, most have committed nonviolent property or drug crimes or misdemeanors. Many of these young people are housed in large, congregate-care corrections facilities that are overcrowded, unsafe, and unequipped to provide youth with the safety, education, and care they require.⁷

In addition, confinement in a secure facility all but precludes healthy psychological and social development. Without the freedom to exercise autonomy, the gradual process of maturation—the development of self-direction, social perspective, and responsibility—is effectively

cut off. If we want reform rather than recidivism, then incarcerating nonviolent youth should be a last resort.

THE YTFG COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Our Connected by 25 collaboration on juvenile justice reform focuses on addressing the many challenges faced by court-involved youth. Led by the YTFG Juvenile Justice Work Group, YTFG supports systemwide mechanisms to divert youth from secure confinement into community-based alternatives, while holding youth accountable and providing every young person with the opportunity to connect to caring adults, education, and employment opportunities.

YTFG members coordinate investments to build the capacity of programs and nonprofits that actively seek to:

1 Reduce Institutionalization.

Imprisonment of young people should be seen as a last resort. Youth who can be safely supervised or treated in the community or in nonsecure

⁷ See Building Blocks for Youth’s juvenile justice fact sheets at <http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/issues>.

⁸ For more information, see Building Blocks for Youth, “And Justice for Some” (Youth Law Center, 2000). Available at <http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/justiceforsome>.

facilities—the majority of court-involved youth—have no place in a state’s most expensive and secure institutions. Locked facilities can be replaced by community-based alternatives to detention and incarceration. Various tools, such as risk-assessment instruments and sentencing guidelines, can help jurisdictions distinguish between youth who are dangerous and those who would be better served by a less restrictive setting.

2 Keep Youth Out of Adult Prisons.

During the 1990s, 49 states altered their laws to increase the number of minors who could be tried as adults. Roughly 210,000 minors nationwide are now prosecuted in adult courts each year. Adult jails and prisons are extraordinarily dangerous for young people. Studies show that youth held in adult facilities are five times more likely to report being a victim of rape, twice as likely to report being beaten by staff, and 50 percent more likely to be attacked with a weapon. Moreover, youth sent to adult court generally return to crime at a higher rate. In response, some states are adopting reforms to keep some youth out of adult prisons. For example, in 2002, Illinois passed a reverse waiver law that allows for the cases of some youth to be returned to the juvenile court.

3 Reduce Racial Disparity.

In the United States, people of color are far less likely than whites to receive fair and equal treatment when arrested, at hearings, and during case dispositions. Studies show that youth of color receive harsher sentences and fewer services in the juvenile justice system than white youth who have committed the same category of offenses. With support from a number of foundations, officials in some jurisdictions are beginning to address disproportionate confinement of minority youth. Many reforms focus on specific decision points in the juvenile justice system, with the aim of advocating for equal treatment *and* equal access to community-based services for youth of color. Some strategies being adopted include the analysis of racial data on incarcerated youth, the use of objective screening instruments for determining sentencing and services, and increasing diversity among the adult staff.⁸

4 Ensure Youth Access to Quality Counsel.

Youth need access to qualified, well-resourced defense counsel throughout the juvenile or criminal court process. Studies indicate that better representation results in less incarceration and better outcomes for youth. Providing legal representation

to a young person requires special skills and training. Juvenile defense counsel must understand the impact that adolescent development and early childhood trauma, disabilities, or lack of maturity can have on the outcome of the case. Some promising approaches include early assignment of counsel, creation of policies that ensure that *all* youth have legal representation, and cross-system representation when they are involved in multiple systems.

5 Create a Range of Community-Based Programs.

Several jurisdictions are creating continua of community-based alternatives to confinement that offer various degrees of youth supervision. For youth with the highest risk of re-offending, jurisdictions

are implementing evidenced-based programs that have demonstrated success in preventing youth crime. Two of these programs, Functional Family Therapy (FFT) and Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST), involve intensive, home-based counseling for the family. A third, Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC), combines short-term therapeutic foster care for the youth and intensive counseling for the biological family. All three programs focus on the family, and none involves incarceration.

6 Recognize and Serve Youth with Specialized Needs.

The juvenile justice system is often a dumping ground for youth whose primary problems include serious emotional disturbance, developmental disabilities,



substance abuse, or a combination of these challenges. High-quality mental health and substance abuse services are a vital part of facilitating the rehabilitation of youth with specialized needs. Juvenile justice involvement should be seen as appropriate *only* when delinquent behaviors—and not disabilities—are the primary reason for confinement. When community-based programs for mentally and developmentally disabled youth are strengthened and increased, jurisdictions have more appropriate and cost-effective options to serve these specific populations.

7 Create Smaller Rehabilitative Institutions.

Some states recognize the wisdom of phasing out large, prison-like youth institutions. In their place, they are creating small, home-like, secure facilities for the remaining youth who need close monitoring. These facilities are run by youth specialists, provide extensive individual programming, and engage families in the rehabilitation process. To the extent possible, they are being built close to youths' home communities to facilitate residents' ultimate reintegration into the community.

8 Improve Aftercare and Re-entry.

For the nearly 100,000 youth released from custody annually, the transition

back home is their best “second chance” to succeed. Returning youth need a smooth transition back into their communities and schools and strong support from family or other caring adults. Collaboration among multiple government agencies and nonprofit providers is essential. The best re-entry programs begin while a youth is still confined. Youth should be enrolled in school immediately or have a job waiting. Workforce development programs that help young people make money often motivate youth and increase enthusiasm for learning. Youth must also have access to the same kind of mental health and substance abuse services they received while in residential care.

9 Maximize Youth, Family, and Community Participation.

Jurisdictions engaged in juvenile justice reform understand the value of including youth, family members, and representatives from community-based organizations in the process of designing and implementing juvenile justice programs and policies. Using techniques such as family conferencing, jurisdictions are learning to work *with* parents, rather than against them. Jurisdictions are also successfully experimenting with ways to build community participation and youth feedback into the system. This kind of collaboration improves

programming and policy and encourages young people to organize and advocate for reform.

CONNECTED BY 25: INVESTMENTS IN JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM

A few years ago, YTFG members implemented grantmaking strategies, based on well-documented models across the country, to coordinate funding to support reforms that significantly reduce the incarceration of youth. As an example, our emerging work includes the following investments that leverage the individual grantmaking of YTFG members:

- The Annie E. Casey Foundation has worked in partnership with government officials and several funders, including the California Endowment and the JEHT Foundation, to reduce reliance on juvenile detention that confines youth in secure facilities away from their families and neighborhoods while they await trial. Juvenile Detention Alternatives Investment (JDAI) model sites—Cook County, Illinois; Multnomah County, Oregon; and Santa Cruz County, California—have demonstrated remarkable success at reducing recidivism and reducing reliance on secure detention by developing alternatives to incarceration, using data to drive decision making, improving case processing, and reducing detention of youth of color.
- The Connecticut-based Tow Foundation partnered with the JEHT Foundation to create the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance to educate Connecticut politicians, criminal justice practitioners, and the public about juvenile justice and to advocate for statewide reform. The advocacy of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance helped prompt the state's governor to direct the closing of Connecticut's only juvenile training school in 2008. Both foundations are encouraged by increased efforts to raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction from 16 to 18 and by the public funding of more community-based services in Connecticut.
- Policymakers in California are exploring ways to reform the California Youth Authority, one of the world's largest and most debilitating youth prison systems. Funders from around the country have responded, including these YTFG members: the Open Society Institute, the JEHT Foundation, the Zellerbach Family Foundation, and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation.

We seek to build on the early successes of our grants in California, Connecticut, Oregon, and other communities to coordinate longer-term investments that improve options and outcomes for all court-involved youth by promoting opportunities for community-based programs and advocating for alternatives to incarceration.



chapter 5:

helping youth who are involved
in the foster care system

“I like to think of foster care as an opportunity rather than a punishment. I know if I had not been in foster care I would not have my wonderful adoptive family, I would not have graduated high school, I would not have graduated college, and most importantly I would not be the person that I am.”

*Mary Lee, Former President,
National Foster Youth Advisory Council*

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Among the youth at greatest risk of becoming disconnected are the more than 300,000 older youth who live outside their birth families, in foster families, group homes, and institutions. Research suggests that, without the extended support that most young people receive from their families, foster youth face enormous challenges in making a smooth transition to adulthood and building successful lives.

Foster youth often bear the painful burden of abuse, neglect, abandonment, and families that threaten their health and well-being. In most cases, the government has become their guardian

because the parents who brought them into the world are unable or unwilling to provide proper care and nurturing. While the goal of the child welfare system is to provide care until foster youth can be reunited safely with their parents or placed permanently with other family members or an adoptive family, the first foster care placement is rarely the last. Usually, finding a permanent arrangement takes many months, if not years. Too often, it does not happen at all.

What, then, determines whether a young person leaving foster care will transition safely into adulthood? There is no simple answer; often, the difference between success and failure is no more than the intervention of a caring adult. However, a focus on economic success is often a potent and predictive measure of how well youth will manage a number of fundamental aspects of adult life, including housing, family stability, safety, health, and social well-being. Helping vulnerable young people acquire the means to achieve economic success empowers them to improve their lives, make choices, and take charge of their own development. It

also provides them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence they will need to address the inevitable difficulties of life.

THE YTFG COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Our Connected by 25 project on foster care reform seeks to address the many challenges that face youth in the foster care system and those who are aging out. Led by the YTFG Foster Care Work Group, YTFG encourages investments that strengthen and reform the child welfare system and provide foster care youth with pathways to lifelong economic well-being and financial success.

YTFG has identified six interrelated strategies that are components of a comprehensive approach for addressing the needs of youth in foster care and young adults leaving foster care. These include:

1 Support Child Welfare Reform.

Our nation's child welfare system should be strengthened and reformed. At a minimum, the system should protect vulnerable children and address the devastating effects of child maltreatment, ensure that medical and mental health needs are identified and met, help foster youth maintain positive connections to their families, minimize

the disruption of repeated changes in placements in foster homes and group homes, ensure that there is permanency and stability in their care, and strengthen independent living programs.

2 Advocate and Support Educational Attainment.

Foster youth need academic support programs to help them become lifelong learners, complete high school, and pursue and complete their postsecondary education or a skills training program that will enable them to pursue careers in their chosen fields.

3 Facilitate Access to Workforce Development Opportunities.

Foster youth need to develop skills, knowledge, and work habits that will make them employable. They need access to programs that will help them get and retain stable jobs, advance beyond entry-level positions, and pursue self-supporting careers.

4 Promote Financial Literacy.

Foster youth need access to instructional support programs that will help them acquire financial literacy and personal financial management skills.

Specifically, foster youth need assistance with learning how to develop budgets, manage their money, obtain credit, pay taxes, and respond to unanticipated financial problems and crises.

5 Encourage Savings and Asset Development.

Programs must be developed to provide youth with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities that will increase their personal income and help them accumulate material assets, such as cars, homes, savings accounts, retirement funds, and ownership interests in property and other items of value.

6 Create Entrepreneurship Opportunities.

Savings and asset development are not enough to fully achieve economic self-sufficiency and create wealth. Data show that there is a greater concentration of wealth in the hands of entrepreneurs—families that run their own business—than all other families. Foster youth are at a disadvantage, given the tenuous nature of their family connections and their limited exposure to entrepreneurial principles. Foster youth should be exposed to the world of business ownership and entrepreneurship. They need access to programs that can teach them how to successfully navigate the workplace,

“All my life, I had prayed for a family.”

Alfonso Torres, deceased, former foster care youth

develop ideas for a business venture, write and implement a business plan, and start and grow a successful business.

CONNECTED BY 25: INVESTMENTS IN FOSTER CARE REFORM

In 2004, YTFG members launched an ambitious co-investment enterprise to build the capacity of communities to effectively support young people in transition, to initiate and strengthen federal and state policies to support youth who are leaving foster care, and to raise public awareness of the needs of foster youth and of effective ways to help them become successful adults. This collaborative effort includes a national demonstration in Indianapolis, Indiana; Tampa, Florida; and the state of California.

Together, members of YTFG are actively building a national movement of funders, community leaders, young people, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers with a shared focus on supporting successful futures for foster youth. In each of the demonstration communities, local leaders are coming together around the YTFG vision for foster youth and shaping efforts to



prepare foster youth for successful adulthood on the basis of the unique needs and resources in their community.

YTFG coordinated investments of funders to support these programs:

- The United Way of Central Indiana is completing an environmental scan and developing an implementation proposal for ways to better support youth who are aging out of the foster care system in Indianapolis. This demonstration community will provide education advocates to support academic achievement of foster youth and will partner with Goodwill Industries to implement workforce development activities.
- A small cohort of counties in California is building a comprehensive continuum of services that support foster youth ages 14-24 years who are transitioning to adulthood. This effort is closely

aligned with the California Family to Family Initiative, a child welfare system reform initiative whose goal is to provide state and local child welfare systems with the principles, strategies, and tools to build a network of family-based care and community partnership to support abused and neglected children. Participating counties include Alameda, Fresno, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and Stanislaus.

- Hillsborough Kids, Inc., is working with partner organizations to provide education advocates, intervention specialists, and peer telephone counselors to youth in Hillsborough County, Florida.

Our aim is to document the implementation process and assess the impact of our coordinated efforts in these demonstration sites. We also support others in their efforts to replicate the demonstration across other communities.

chapter 6:

beyond the tunnel problem:
the need for systemwide reform

“We will only be successful if we embrace the fact that, although we often fund in programmatic areas, these silos really don’t represent the world in which our youth live.”

Gary Stangler, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

Although YTFG has identified interruption in education, incarceration, and foster care as key transition points that cause many youth to disconnect, our members constantly work to build their knowledge, awareness, and grantmaking craft around the cross-cutting nature of the issues that affect our most vulnerable young people.

While many elected officials, foundations, and nonprofit organizations are working hard to tackle youth-related challenges, many of the public policies and systems designed to assist struggling young people actually exacerbate their problems. From schooling practices that make it easier for struggling students to drop out than to complete their education to juvenile justice policies that fail to take developmental issues into account, current policies and practices can

contribute to the causes of disconnection. YTFG believes that effective solutions will include systemwide reforms that engage the many different agencies that currently serve youth.

In order to be more effective grantmakers and to support innovative solutions to addressing cross-cutting challenges older youth face, YTFG has recently launched an effort to align our support for the following systemic strategies with our Connected by 25 investments:

SYSTEMIC STRATEGY 1: Improve Youth-Related Information Systems

Sadly, the “Information Age” has yet to reach the world of youth development. School districts, public care agencies, and policymakers are all notoriously poor at collecting and sharing data and case information regarding youth at risk. Often, the data that do exist are woefully outdated. This information gap makes it nearly impossible for adults to know whom they are serving, whom others are serving, and who is falling through the cracks. In order to design and improve interventions for youth, states, organizations, and

YTFG Snapshot

THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE: AN EXAMPLE OF THE CROSS-CUTTING NATURE OF YOUTH ISSUES

To understand the importance of thinking about youth issues in a holistic manner, consider how efforts to improve education and other systems that serve youth can unintentionally create new policies, regulations, and procedures that in reality push youth out of education and into the juvenile and criminal justice system. Often referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline” or the “prison track,” many school policies actually undermine the efforts of No Child Left Behind and high school reforms. The pipeline is made up of four components, each of which contains a number of inappropriate or ineffective responses to children and youth as they negotiate the chaos of adolescence:

- **Damaging Attendance Policies and Procedures:** In many communities, schools neither notify parents in a timely manner that their children are not in school nor offer “catch-up time.” Instead, these schools use punitive measures and resort to failing and retaining students. As students get older, many communities depend on police and court interventions that result in the arrest of students for truancy.
- **Disciplinary Schools:** The dramatic increase in suspension and expulsion of students for “behavior issues” is creating a separate and unequal system of education. Students are increasingly sent to disciplinary schools that, in most cases, are simply “pre-jail” institutions. There has been no research to demonstrate that these schools are effective learning options for students or that they result in skill development, regular school re-enrollment, or graduation.

- **Lock-'Em-Up Strategies:** Despite an overall drop in crime, 47 states have made their juvenile justice systems more punitive over the past decade. Except for a few exemplary states, most juvenile justice systems have a dismal record of helping students get back on a positive path. And, once again, young people of color are treated differently every step of the way.
- **Denial of Education:** Once released from incarceration, students often face nearly insurmountable barriers to re-enrolling in school and getting back on track. Some states have policies that bar students from returning to their home school. Bureaucratic rules and hostile school environments are common. Many systems make it difficult for youth to get transcripts and transfer credits. These factors all decrease the likelihood of graduating.

In order to fully address the challenges that face youth in our nation’s high schools, the prison track must be factored into assessments of all education reforms. Treating these issues as interrelated will ensure that state and district leaders are aware of the potential of punitive policies for pushing out students and undermining education reform. Equally important are reforms in the juvenile justice system to reduce racial disparity and increase alternatives to confinement that help youth finish their education.

“Our youth need to be able to come back to the communities that they are from and receive coordinated support. The great programs in the network can make this possible.”

Marlene Sanchez, Co-Chair of the Community Justice Network for Youth

agencies must make data collection and information sharing a priority. If kids really count, then we need to count our kids.

SYSTEMIC STRATEGY 2: Direct Funds to Effective Practices

Today, states are increasingly directing their dollars toward the consequences of youth disconnection by beefing up police forces and youth correctional facilities, instead of targeting the problems that often lead to youth disconnection. Policymakers and funders need to refocus their resources on programs and initiatives that have a track record of successfully intervening at critical points in young people’s lives.

SYSTEMIC STRATEGY 3: Eliminate Punitive and Exclusionary Policies

Equally important as using effective practices, our nation must eliminate policies that lead to the disconnection of students from their schools, families, and communities. When we exclude students from school and the community without

offering effective programs to help them learn the skills they need and address the underlying emotional issues, we are only shutting the door on their future and our own. Policies related to truancy, discipline, access to education, and higher-education funding need to be reviewed to ensure that they are being implemented in a way that promotes connection and learning.

SYSTEMIC STRATEGY 4: Work Together Across Agencies

The lack of coordination among adults in schools, public care agencies, and the courts has tragic consequences for youth. For example, all too often, the entry point of a child into the public care arena defines the response and that young person’s future course. A young person arrested for petty theft might experience consequences through the court system when the real problem stemmed from a school issue about which the courts will never learn. Likewise, when young people are simultaneously involved in multiple agencies, the individual responsibility of any one agency is reduced. As a result, young people in the system often slip through the bureaucratic cracks or are passed repeatedly from one agency to another. To effectively assist all young people, it is necessary to promote systemwide accountability and interagency coordination.



chapter 7: a call to action

“To borrow from the cliché “talk is cheap,” it is now time to put our ideas and words into action. We must remain committed to finding resolutions to common issues and difficulties that youth experience in the child welfare system.”

April Curtis, former foster youth

Every grantmaker and policymaker faces a choice: Support effective and proven strategies that keep youth on the right path or throw money at ineffective methods that close the door on the future of our young people. YTFG hopes that this publication prompts grantmakers, policymakers, and advocates in your community to get serious about helping all youth to connect by age 25.

The best way to begin is to identify the unique issues that face youth in your community. The following assessment tool and policy checklists provide a framework for beginning a dialogue about current practices in your state and asking the hard questions that need to be asked. But don't stop there. After assessing the unique issues in your community, log on to our website at www.ytfg.org to learn more about how to invest in systematic reforms that will benefit all youth.

WHAT'S GOING ON IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

This tool is designed to help funders ask key questions that will help them to better assess challenges in the communities where they invest.

- **Are we offering a future or poverty?** What is our four-year high school graduation rate (excluding GED)? How great is the racial disparity in the graduation rate? Has the rate increased or dropped over the past 5 years?
- **To what extent is institutional racism at work in our policies?** To what extent does youth disconnection have a disproportionate impact on youth of color in our city or state? Which communities in our state have been effective in reducing racial inequity in education, juvenile justice, foster care, and teen pregnancy?
- **How are we doing as guardians?** Many students are in public care. What is the high school graduation rate for youth in foster care or on welfare? Has it increased or dropped over the past 5 years? What percentage of youth is homeless within a year after leaving foster care?
- **Do paths lead to helping hands or closed doors?** What are the literacy rates for court-involved youth? What is

the high school graduation rate for youth who have been imprisoned or detained? Are suspension and expulsion rates going up or down? How many of the children who are court-involved or suspended/expelled have health issues or disabilities (cognitive problems, substance abuse problems, mental health problems), and how many receive effective treatment?

- **Do policies challenge or reinforce racial disparities?** How do policies, assessment tools, and information systems help guide effective methods for reducing racial disparities in promotion and graduation? Which communities or systems have been effective in reducing racial disparities? Which have tried?
- **How effectively are public funds used?** What percentage of available federal youth funding is being accessed at the state and local levels? How effective are the systems designed to help prepare youth for the adult world? How do the systems in your city compare to those in other cities in your state? How do programs in your state compare to the best in the country?
- **How accessible is the information?** If you have difficulty collecting data to answer these and similar questions, you have a lot of work to do!

POLICY CHECKLISTS

These checklists are designed to help state and local officials explore how their policies impact specific segments of the youth population.

✓ Youth with Interrupted Educations

1. What percentage of students who have left school, recently immigrated, or been retained receive their high school diplomas?
 - Exit exams and graduation requirements aligned only with four-year college admissions
 - Programs linking the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to traditional high schools (6 hours of classroom per day)
3. What policies allow students who have left school or who have been retained to accelerate their learning (e.g., credit for proficiency, dual credit)? What policies support educational advocates in helping youth solve cross-cutting issues?
4. Are graduation requirements and exit exams aligned to provide the greatest access to college?

5. How do funding streams and policies create incentives or disincentives for school holding power? For recovery of youth who have dropped out?

✓ Court-Involved Youth

1. How can states prevent the transfer of youth to adult prisons?
2. What policies ensure that the juvenile justice system operates as a rehabilitation system?
3. How do policies ensure that young people have access to counsel?
4. What incentives are in place to encourage the development of effective, small residential facilities rather than ineffective, large institutions?
5. What policies support after-care and re-entry services?

✓ Foster Youth

1. What services are available to foster youth through age 21? Health care through Medicaid? Housing assistance? Tuition? Case management?
2. To what degree are foster youth accessing magnet, charter, and small schools? What policies are in place to ensure that they are exempt from geographic or zoning requirements for school selection unless they choose not to be? What policies are in place to ensure that they have immediate access to all enrichment and support services?

3. What policies are in place to ensure that foster youth can attain economic self-sufficiency? Access to job development? Individual Development Accounts? Financial literacy and life skills?

✓ Teen Parents

1. How many teen parents are in your city, region, or state? What are the birth rates for teens, and how do they disaggregate by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status?
2. What services are in place to help teen parents stay in school or re-enter school?
3. What services are available to help teen fathers improve their relationships with the mothers of their children? Are parenting-skills classes offered to fathers, as well as to mothers? Are job-training services available for young fathers?
4. What services are available to teen parents? Medical? Welfare? Educational? To what extent are services offered by different agencies coordinated within cities, regions, or the state?

Much is already being done to answer these questions and to get our older youth at risk back on track. Funders working across the fields of justice, education and foster care are making strategic investments through small, moderate, and large grants. Foundations

are supporting research and policy reform, funding innovative programs, convening government and community-based stakeholders, and supporting training for government and nonprofit leaders.

But there is much more to do.

Through the Youth Transition Funders Group, grantmakers in all fields that affect older youth can align their efforts, share strategies and knowledge, coordinate investments, capitalize on one another's expertise, avoid duplication of effort, and

expand opportunities to build upon one another's work. Increasingly, we are finding occasions to fund together.

We hope to entice other grantmakers—especially from the private, corporate, and public sectors—to seize this call to action to support the safe passage of America's youth to successful adulthood. After all, these are all of our children. Let us profit from what they become.

Reach out to YTFG and find out more.





chapter 8:

references and resources

YOUTH TRANSITIONS FUNDERS GROUP

Our members work in partnership to support nonprofits, initiatives, and policies that include the following strategies and approaches:

- **Fostering Collaboration between Funder and Field:** Efforts by foundations and grantees to work together more effectively through shared strategies, coordinated investments, and knowledge sharing.
- **Creating Common Communications:** Development of tools to help advocates create clear, common messages about young people in transition that can then be used to persuade policymakers to become involved in the issue.
- **Addressing Disproportionate Negative Outcomes for Youth of Color:** Efforts to confront structural racism through awareness building and careful consideration of how policy and practice disproportionately impact young people of color.
- **Seeking Systemic Reform:** Initiatives that move beyond local programs to strategies that improve policies and reform the education, justice, child welfare, and mental health systems that serve youth.
- **Promoting Youth Engagement and Advocacy:** Efforts to partner directly with young people to better understand the barriers they face and to shape strategies for improvement and reform.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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PUBLICATIONS USED IN THIS REPORT

Portions of this document were previously published in the following reports produced by YTFG work groups and partners. These documents can be found at www.ytfg.org.

- “Beyond the Tunnel Problem: Addressing Cross-Cutting Issues that Impact Vulnerable Youth,” Timothy Ross and Joel Miller, Vera Institute. Part of a briefing paper series, a partnership between the Youth Transition Funders Group and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- “Connected by 25: Improving the Life Chances of the Country’s Most Disadvantaged 14-24-Year-Olds,” Michael Wald and Tia Martinez, Stanford University, 2003.
- “Connected by 25: A Plan for Investing in Successful Futures for Foster Youth,” YTFG Foster Care Work Group with the Finance Project, 2003.
- “A Blueprint for Juvenile Justice Reform,” YTFG Juvenile Justice Work Group, 2005.
- “The Alternative Pathways Project: A Framework for Preparing All Students for College and Work,” JD Hoyer and Chris Sturgis, 2003.
- “Powerful Pathways: Framing Options and Opportunities for Vulnerable Youth,” Youth Transition Funders Group, 2001.

GET CONNECTED

Youth advocates communicate with one another and keep up with the latest in youth transition issues. Here are a few ways for youth advocates, practitioners, board members, and those in public positions to connect to the latest news:

- **Funders** can find out more about YTFG membership by sending an e-mail to membershipservices@ytfg.org. Also, Funders can subscribe to the YTFG e-newsletter by sending an e-mail to info@ytfg.org and placing “Newsletter” in the subject line.
- **Advocates** can join the Connected by 25 e-list sponsored by Connect for Kids at jan@connectforkids.org.
- **Local Policymakers** can join the National League of Cities Municipal Network for Disconnected Youth at http://www.nlc.org/iyef/program_areas/youth_development/4627.cfm.





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