

Stemming the Tide:

Accelerating the Adoption of the Multiple Pathways to Graduation Framework through Coordinated Grantmaking and Leadership

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For the first time in our country's history, there is a hunger and demand to address the appallingly low graduation rates in which nearly one quarter of our young people do not get a diploma by the end of four years of high school. Given the tremendous amount of work to be done, it is critically important that foundations use our resources to maximize our impact, influence and leverage.¹ This paper is an open invitation for funders to work together to address the graduation crisis by accelerating school districts' adoption of the Multiple Pathways to Graduation (MPG) framework.²

Multiple Pathways to Graduation is not a stand-alone high school reform strategy. In fact, it should be considered a critical element of any strategic investments to improve college readiness and access. MPG is a data-driven approach that guides school districts in re-engineering their operations to improve their response to students slipping off-track and away from school. It is a framework that shifts the responsibility for the dropout crisis from students to the education system. After completing the MPG analysis, districts are empowered to take advantage of a variety of opportunities to increase their graduation rates. By balancing efforts to improve academic skills with the implementation of the MPG framework, districts can improve graduation rates and college readiness simultaneously.

For those of you who want to jump right in, the last section *The Work Ahead* contains a discussion on the most important items that need to be addressed. Your input, drawing on your knowledge and experiences, will be invaluable to ensure that we design the most effective coordinated investment strategy possible. If you are interested in philanthropic collaboration, the paper also reviews the history of the efforts of the Multiple Pathways to Graduation Workgroup, including our framework, and a quick review of the current status of the efforts.

1 The Youth Transitions Funders Group uses the Results Based Grantmaking structure to enable foundations to think collaboratively across the diverse set of programs, strategies and initiatives. Go to www.fiscalpolicy studies.com/PDF%20files/Results%20Based%20Grantmaking.pdf for more information.

2 For more information on Multiple Pathways to Graduation read *Closing the Graduation Gap* found at www.ytfg.org

A Look Back: The History of the Multiple Pathways to Graduation Workgroup

In 2001, a group of funders concerned about the dismal outcomes of the young people who leave public systems without effectively connecting to post-secondary education, training or the workforce began to work together to make sure that we were maximizing the results of our resources. Developing a common analysis, agreeing upon a common set of outcomes, and committing to strengthening our grant making, we established ourselves as the Youth Transition Funders Group.³ Breaking into three workgroups—juvenile justice, foster care and out-of-school youth—members developed frameworks to enable improved coordination of funds and knowledge sharing.

PHASE 1 ANALYSIS

The first stage of the workgroup focused on out-of-school youth was to develop an analysis and framework. With the help of Jobs for the Future and J.D. Hoyer, we came to the conclusion that the most important goal was to stop the bleeding of young people from our education system. Our rationale was three-fold:

1. Public funding in youth employment had been so drastically undermined that no more 3% of all young people deemed eligible were served through programs funded by the Workforce Investment Act. Essentially, the United States no longer had a viable second chance system, even if the policy and infrastructure continued to survive.
2. The economic changes our country was undergoing meant that young people needed to have at least some post-secondary education and training to have access to career paths that would lead to family-wage jobs. Furthermore, our country had a growing gap in people prepared to fill many of the emerging jobs requiring some technical skills, leading to outsourcing to other countries.
3. Education reforms that focused solely on system alignment, improved academic achievement and increasing college readiness were not producing the expected improved graduation rates. The students that were graduating were doing so with greater skills. Yet, there were signs that for the students not graduating, they were leaving sooner and with fewer credits. Our analysis told us that if we continued on this same path, the inequities across race and class would continue to widen—reinforcing cycles of poverty and weakening our country's economic strength.

We knew that in order to permanently address the problem of out-of-school youth we needed to stem the tide of young people leaving school prematurely. Yet, neither the dynamics of the problem nor the solution sets were clear. We simply did not understand why increased academic skills in earlier grades were not leading directly to increased graduation rates. Thus, we designed a *strategic assessment* initiative that would allow us to draw from the knowledge of cities leading the way.

³ See www.ytfg.org for more information. The YTFG's analysis is presented in *Connected by 25: Improving the Life Chances of the Country's Most Vulnerable 14-24 Year Olds* by Michael Wald and Tia Martinez.

PHASE 2 DEVELOPMENT OF COORDINATED INVESTMENT STRATEGY

Establishing ourselves as the Multiple Pathways to Graduation workgroup (MPGW), we developed a framework to guide a co-investment strategy to support the strategic assessment.⁴ During this process, there was enormous transfer of knowledge as local and national foundations learned from each other. We invited cities to apply for \$250,000⁵ and to join a learning network supported by Jobs for the Future. Selected cities had to demonstrate a commitment to the following four activities to be considered a systemic approach to the graduation crisis:

1. **Data:** Improving the capacity to gather, examine, and use information, including existing resources and levers for keeping students on-track, recuperating those students that fall off-track, and recovering those students that disconnect from school.
2. **Supply:** Increasing the supply of quality educational options for off-track students, in and out of school.
3. **Stakeholders:** Building relationships between and mobilizing support of key partners and stakeholders.
4. **Policy:** Addressing the policy and funding environment at the local and state level to identify policy barriers that impede systemic and equitable schools reform for students off-track to graduation.

This resulted in our funding the work of five cities— Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Portland and a unique effort led by People and Communities Together (PACT) and United Way Silicon Valley in San Jose.

There were many successes and lessons learned throughout this process, too many to recount here. The primary weakness in this stage of our work was the inability to gather and sustain adequate funding due to three challenges:

- This effort was marginalized in most foundations with funding levels lower than other program areas or perceived as a supplemental effort to other high school reforms. Thus we were never able to increase the funding to the five leading cities.
- The particular nature and operating practices of each foundation resulted in our only being able to maintain funding for the five cities for two years. The need to continually justify the MPG effort and internal rules and operating procedures undermined our ability to run a co-investment.
- Staff turnover resulted in some foundations no longer participating in the MPG. The absence of an expectation for program staff involved in strategic grantmaking to coordinate investments is an ongoing challenge to our commitment to maximize the impact of philanthropic funds.

Our next stage of work is outlined in the section *The Work Ahead*.

4 Our overall co-investment strategy included specific investment goals such that 65% of funds were directed to five cities poised to move a citywide strategy; 10% of funds were to seed and build readiness of an additional 25 cities; 10% of funds went to support policy development at state and federal level; and 15% to support advocacy and organizing at the national, state and local level.

5 Approximately 20% of the grants were directed to community organizing or advocacy as we believed that engaging community members early was critical to the success of these efforts.

Progress in Establishing Multiple Pathways to Graduation

By far the most exemplary work is found in Chicago, New York City, Philadelphia, and Portland Oregon. There the leadership of the school district, often in partnership with citywide partners, fully integrated the MPG framework into their high school reform efforts. Each district has completed segmentation analyses of the high school population to understand the dynamics behind their graduation crisis. Depending on their findings, each district developed extensive strategies to expand recuperation and recovery options and/or implemented early intervention strategies.⁶

EXPANSION OF THE MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION APPROACH TO OTHER CITIES

Interestingly it has been the Department of Labor, at the state and national level that has recognized the value of this work shaping investments to replicate it. In Pennsylvania, the Department of Labor funded nine cities to plan for implementation of the MPG framework. In 2007, the U.S. Department of Labor built on our efforts in establishing the Multiple Education Pathway Blueprint awarding \$2,950,000 to six cities: Brockton, Des Moines, Fall River, Metairie LA, Mobile AL, and Pittsburgh. As expected, without a clear message from education policymakers, it has been challenging for these communities to engage their school districts.

Disappointingly, state and federal Departments of Education have shown limited interest in encouraging cities to address the graduation crisis through the MPG framework. As we move forward, we need to take this into consideration as we shape the next set of investments.

Foundations are expanding the MPG approach using two different approaches:

- **Planning Grants:** The Mott Foundation has developed a statewide approach in which planning grants were awarded to Detroit, Flint, Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids to begin the MPG process.
- **Embedding MPG into District Reform:** The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is embedding the segmentation analysis into their work with school districts.

PROGRESS AND INCREASED KNOWLEDGE IN USING THE MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION APPROACH

Using the four-part framework, the following is a quick glimpse at the progress and increased knowledge in using the MPG approach in school districts.

⁶ For a summary of the findings go to www.ytfg.org/mpgresources for Pathways to Graduation: Data-Driven Strategies for Differentiated Graduations Rate Improvements by The Parthenon Group and Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000-2005

Data: Improving the capacity to gather, examine, and use information, including existing resources and levers for keeping students on-track, recuperating those students that fall off-track, and recovering those students that disconnect from school.

Substantial progress has been made in both understanding the dynamics underlying the graduation crisis as well as developing the methodology for districts to segment their customers. Demand is growing in districts to complete the segmentation process with costs varying from \$50,000 to \$400,000 depending on the quality of the district data system, breadth and depth of questions, and design of the process. The MPG Workgroup highly recommends that this process be completed with the help of a research partner.

Furthermore, states continue to improve their information systems that will greatly improve the ability of districts to complete accurate segmentation analysis. For example, a funder collaboration in California that includes Walter S. Johnson, Hewlett, and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has made significant progress in advancing the use of the student identifier and longitudinal database.

Supply: Increasing the supply of quality educational options for off-track students, in and out of school.

There are three aspects of improving the supply of educational options for off-track students, usually referred to as transfer or alternative schools. First, it is important to immediately expand the supply of options. A recent publication by the Community Service Society of New York, *Out of Focus* reviewed the availability of services and determined that no more than 7% of disconnected youth had access to programs. Furthermore, even with its expansion of transfer schools, the NYC DOE offered 5500 school and program slots for 70,000 students off-track and still in school. Based on similar analysis in Philadelphia, we believe that one of the most important steps to address the graduation crisis is to expand the supply of high quality transfer schools.

Second, districts are finding that it is important to expand the variety of transfer schools. New York City and Philadelphia found a mismatch between the current design of their transfer schools and the greatest needs of students. New York City modified its policy to begin accepting younger students with fewer credits into transfer schools while Philadelphia is prototyping accelerated schools for students with few or no credits.

Recognizing that the admissions criteria for transfer schools and other second-chance programs often exclude the students who most need services, New York City and Philadelphia are creating ladders to pre-existing educational options. The Youth Development Institute in NYC has been developing a program for youth disconnected from school to build their literacy skills so that they can pursue post-secondary education and training. In Philadelphia, a pre-Gateway to College program has been developed so that more students can gain access to the exemplary alternative model that uses an 8th grade literacy threshold for entrance.

Finally, districts are improving the quality of transfer schools, including closing alternative models with poor quality. An important resource is the Alternative High School Initiative (ahsi.info), a collaboration among ten school developers that has established over 100 new alternative schools across the country. As part of a new place-based approach, AHSI is working with Indianapolis, Newark and Nashville to expand and improve the availability of educational options.

Stakeholders: Building relationships between and mobilizing support of key partners and stakeholders.

Philadelphia continues to have strong community support and engagement. From the very first steps, Philadelphia built a strong base of community support as well as engaging other key public systems, including child welfare and juvenile justice. In San Jose, People and Community Acting Together (PACT) and the United Way of Silicon Valley built a strong organizing and community engagement model.

Nationally, there are very strong communication and mobilizing efforts led by the Alliance for Excellent Education and America's Promise to raise attention of the graduation crisis. In CA, PICO affiliates, with young people involved are advocating for improvements in the data system and graduation rates. Yet, these efforts do not introduce or advocate for the full MPG framework as the desired solution to the problem. We are pleased that a focus on early warning systems and early intervention is making substantial inroads as a policy solution. Yet, these efforts have yet to fully embrace the concepts of recuperation and recovery of off-track students.

Policy: Addressing the policy and funding environment at the local and state level to identify policy barriers that impede systemic and equitable schools reform for students off-track to graduation.

There have been a flurry of state policies introduced to make it harder for students to dropout including raising the age to dropout to 17 or 18 or resulting in the loss of students' drivers licenses. Indiana has introduced a formal withdrawal process to counteract the tendency of schools to just let students slowly disengage until they stop coming to school altogether. Interestingly, Indiana's process recognizes that for some students financial hardship may be one of the reasons that students cannot continue school.

The most important policy change that is very slowly taking hold is the implementation of extended graduation rates. Including a five- or six-year graduation rate in addition to the standard four year rate is important to give incentives to districts and schools to continue educating students who entered high school well behind academically, who fell off-track in ninth grade and need to recover credits, or for those students whose schooling was interrupted by substantial challenges in their personal lives. The Alliance for Excellent Education is recommending monitoring four and five-year graduation rates. Michigan and New York are both considering reporting four- and five-year graduation rates.

At the district level, accountability systems are beginning to integrate the learning from MPG. New York City and Chicago include on-track indicators to monitor school effectiveness in expanding the graduation path. Indiana state policy is also demanding that district accountability systems address the on-track indicator. Furthermore, New York City has devised a method to take into account the effectiveness of schools in serving struggling students, those entering high school with low literacy skills.

There have been district level efforts to increase access as already described. And Indiana has introduced the School Flex policy for 11th and 12th graders to get their diploma from a community college. Yet there has been no substantial progress in leveraging sustainable, increased funding to expand transfer schools. The funding gap that occurs for districts trying to increase the quantity of transfer schools is a critical barrier.

The Work Ahead

Our third phase of work will require intensive coordination as we try to leverage current organizations, policies, and districts to fully integrate MPG as a standard operational procedure. We do not have the problem of too few foundations.⁷ We are simply challenged by the complexity of philanthropic collaboration—an organizational commitment for program staff to work together, identify priorities and fully fund efforts that will have the highest impact, influence and leverage.

The discussion below is designed to ignite our thinking about how we should use our funds most strategically. There are many more issues and opportunities to consider as we move forward.

Data: Improving the capacity to gather, examine, and use information, including existing resources and levers for keeping students on-track, recuperating those students that fall off-track, and recovering those students that disconnect from school.

The findings from the segmentation analyses done in the leading cities are making their way through the education policy community with increased attention to early intervention and on-track indicators. Yet the concepts of recuperation and recovery are rarely mentioned, with those education policy organizations focused on K-12 system alignment still showing a reluctance to integrate these critical capacities into their strategies.

There has been significant progress at the state level for managing longitudinal databases.⁸ This allows our states and districts to begin to have the segmentation analysis completed at much broader scale, and even begin to implement the analysis as a standard operating procedure to monitor progress in improving responsiveness to students falling off-track.

Key questions before us include:

- *To what degree do we need more cities to demonstrate the effectiveness of the MPG framework and the segmentation analysis?*
- *What is the most effective way to leverage state and district policy so that the elements of the MPG framework are fully integrated into standard operations? This would include segmentation analysis and the capacity to monitor critical district capacity; transitional power for students to enter high school and stay on-track through ninth grade; the recuperative power to get off-track students back on-track to graduation; and the recovery power to re-engage all students under 18 years of age that have disconnected from education, back into school.*
- *Given that “disconnected youth” end up disconnected partially because there is no public agency responsible for monitoring them or the effectiveness of programs serving them, in what way can we leverage greater attention to the issues of recuperation and recovery? Are there ways of designing data systems to create incentives for districts to address recuperation and recovery to reduce the flow of students into the pool of disconnected youth?*

⁷ We have identified the following foundations focused on improving graduation rates: Carnegie Corporation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, Irvine Foundation, W.S Johnson Foundation, Eugene and Agnes Meyer Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, William Penn Foundation, Skillman Foundation and the supporters of America’s Promise Dropout Summits including State Farm Insurance Company, AT&T, The Boeing Company, Casey Family Programs, Ford Motor Company Fund, ING Foundation, and Marriott Foundation

⁸ See www.dataqualitycampaign.org for more information.

Supply: Increasing the supply of quality educational options for off-track students, in and out of school.

There are three critical challenges for increasing the supply of high quality transfer schools. First, we need more innovation to design models for older students with few credits and minimal skills. Second, we need to build on the random assignment evaluations underway for Youth Corps and the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program. As these findings are released, we need to take them into consideration in program expansion. In addition, the evidence of MDRC's evaluation of career academies suggests long-term benefits, yet highlights the need to improve the career academy model, similar to other career technical educational models, to ensure that they increase the graduation rates and college persistence for struggling students. Third, we need to support districts in developing a portfolio of schools that optimizes graduation rates and college readiness given their changing populations.

Key questions before us include:

- *What tools are available to help district/state to think through the costs and benefits of increasing supply of transfer schools?*
- *How can we think about the cost-effectiveness of different models?*
- *Should we try to figure out less expensive ways of serving off-track students?*
- *What is an appropriate benchmark to use for what districts should expect in terms of increased graduation rates from their pool of transfer schools?*

Stakeholders: Building relationships between and mobilizing support of key partners and stakeholders.

The community engagement efforts need further refinement as insights from CSS suggest that even parents and community members see the dropout crisis as a reflection of the individual character of the young person, rather than a failure of the education system. Thus, we have further work to do to better understand the messages that will generate the most demand for schools to increase the graduation rates.

Key questions before us include:

- *What level of public will is needed to fully engage the education policymakers in addressing the graduation crisis?*
- *What lessons can we learn from other efforts in expanding public will through communication, advocacy, and organizing? Are there certain segments of the community that are more likely to be advocates for off-track students? What constituency groups have self-interests that may position them in opposition to the MPG framework?*
- *How can we shape a communication effort that builds on the lens that dropping out of school is a reflection of individual character yet leads to policy and systemic reforms?*

Policy: Addressing the policy and funding environment at the local and state level to identify policy barriers that impede systemic and equitable schools reform for students off-track to graduation.

Our biggest challenge is that national advocates that focus on the dropout crisis have yet to fully the MPG framework. Although a separate paper would be required to delve into all the reasons explaining this situation, we need to design specific strategies to engage the education advocates raising awareness of the dropout crisis, the traditional youth employment groups focused on disconnected youth and the rapidly emerging efforts to address the crisis in the well-being of African-American young men.

Key questions before us include:

- *What alliances need to be developed to fully integrate the MPG framework into high school reform? Is a new organization dedicated to ensuring off-track students have access to education required?*
- *How do we ensure that all the states that agreed to the NGA compact on using the cohort methodology to establish graduation rates fully implement it in the near future?*
- *What will it take to get every state to use a four- and five-year graduation rate? What opportunities offer the highest leverage?*
- *How important is it for us to commit to policies that enable competency-based credits? What value will competency-based credit accumulation offer the efforts to increase the graduation rates? What prevents districts and schools where competency-based credits to be used from taking more advantage of it?*

Knowledge Development and Sharing: Funding a highly effective set of organizations to share knowledge, resources, and broker relationships to expedite learning and implementation of MPG framework.

If a superintendent is interested in addressing the graduation crisis her options for support are few. When Multiple Pathways to Graduation is googled, the results are New York City Department of MPG and the Youth Transitions Funders Group.

To date YTFG is the only place to find the results of the segmentation analyses of each of the cities. Certainly, *Closing the Graduation Gap* meets the initial needs as a primer for districts to begin the process. Yet our function is only to support funders, not the broad education and advocacy fields. Job for the Future has been instrumental in advancing the MPG framework and can offer districts support in designing their efforts. Information on financing issues and quality indicators for alternative schools can be found at National Youth Employment Coalition (www.nyec.org). Yet, none of these websites offer a one-stop shop for materials to help a district engage in independent learning on how to increase their graduation rates.

In terms of districts learning about the mix of schools they need in their portfolio to address the needs of off-track students there are two resources:

- American Youth Policy Forum's *Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth* provides a quick overviews to a number of transfer school models and educational options. www.yppf.org
- The Alternative High School Initiative offers support to districts in developing ten different school designs. ahsi.info

Key questions before us include:

- *What knowledge is needed to expedite the adoption of the innovations produced by the MPG framework? Where is currently available and where are significant gaps? What is documented or what isn't? What types of opportunities are available for people to learn? Where can they find information?*
- *What are the key sets of information and knowledge that must be shared? Which organizations will offer the most credibility and effectiveness in introducing the MPG framework to district and state leadership?*

The Wisdom of Crowds

This paper has been based on the conversations among the funders that participate in the Youth Transition Funders Group. We are fully aware that with the perspective and input of other funders, the ideas offered here will take new directions and offer unexplored opportunities. In fact, we delight in the opportunity to work with other funders who are willing to share the expertise.

We anticipate that by expanding our network we may begin to explore other investment opportunities that are critical to increasing the graduation rates of our most vulnerable children — innovative career and technical education models that accelerate learning; the use of on-line learning to support students that are balancing school and work; and methods to help students that have disconnected from the K-12 system re-connect on a path that leads them directly to post-secondary attainment. Please let us know if you have other ideas that you would like to have considered as potential areas of collaboration.

We are firm believers in the “wisdom of crowds.” We must be vigilant in finding new mechanisms to support philanthropic collaboration, in order for us to do our very best on behalf of young people. It is only with all of us working together that we can shape the most effective investment strategies.

We look forward to working with you.