CREATING SUSTAINABLE CAREER PATHWAYS FOR DISCONNECTED YOUTH

The Center for Promise Reflects

Jonathan F. Zaff

All youth have potential.

This is a simple and obvious statement; and yet, too many young people in America are considered to be "those youth." "Those youth" who are disaffected. "Those youth" who don't care about their education. "Those youth" who destroy their communities. At the Center for Promise, we don't think about "those youth;" we think about all youth. We know from theory, research, and experience that all youth—regardless of income, geography, race or ethnicity, or gender—have the potential to achieve at the highest levels of education and succeed in any career they pursue.

The prevailing narrative tells us that those who stay laser focused on a goal and work hard will be more likely to meet their goal than those who do not.

What happens, though, if we look deeper into the lives of two young people who share the same goal but have very different lives? Let's consider Robert and Ricky. Robert has teachers at school who will work with him on any academic problem he faces, he has access to phenomenal tutors and other enriching activities outside of school, and he experiences low levels of adversity throughout his life. But for Ricky, not all of his teachers know his name, he lacks access to out-of-school enrichment activities, and the only meal he eats on most days is his subsidized lunch at school. He works to contribute to his family's rent, not for extra spending money on weekends. As both aspire to attend college, Robert can focus on activities that ensure an on-time graduation from high school, while Ricky tries to put food on his family's table. Their priorities in adolescence are different, leading them to set and achieve different things despite sharing the same goal. Robert and Ricky may both be focused and try hard—but when we consider the differences in their day-to-day lives, the prevailing narrative no longer holds up.

The differences between Robert and Ricky have nothing to do with intelligence or aptitude; the differences are all about resources and supports. If research tells us, and we believe, that all young people can succeed in school and life, the question is how we, as a society, support all youth on their pathways so that the roads are wider, better paved, and protected by thick guardrails.

For the past four years, my colleagues and I at the Center for Promise (CfP) have explored questions related to how society can better support young people in reaching high school graduation and making transitions to work. We started by developing a deep understanding of youth who leave school before graduating. We then analyzed the supports they need to be successful in school, work, and life, as well as how policies and programs—like the ones we highlight in this paper—can help them get what they need.

When we began this work we heard another popular narrative from adults and the media about "those youth": that youth who dropped out of high school were bored, disaffected, and deviant.

This narrative did not resonate. What set us firmly on this path was what we learned when we began listening to a group of young people who might fall into the category of "those youth." As we embarked on the report that became Don't Call Them Dropouts, my colleague, Craig McClay, asked a screener question to a group of young people gathered for in-depth interviews. "You're all dropouts, right?" The reaction was provocative, paraphrased as, "We *left* school, but we *didn't* drop out."

The youth perceived dropping out as a sign of failure, and they did not see themselves as failures. What they told us instead, prompted by the simple question, "Why did you leave school?," involved numerous, severe adversities that they had faced, barriers to staying in school, easy routes to leaving school, and overwhelming requirements to get back in. Importantly, they described their lives in ways that busted through the narrative that they were lazy, that they lacked "grit," or that they were destined for failure.

This report is part of a series that we have released on youth and career pathways, with previous reports (Relationships Come First and Turning Points) focused on the primacy of relationships within career pathway programs and the perspectives of youth within those programs. This report is a synthesis of our work over the past four years delving into the lives of young people in the United States who left school without graduating and young people who are disconnected from the workforce. By combining systematic, social science methodologies and analysis with the authentic voices of young people, my hope is that our work provides a more accurate depiction of who "those" young people are and what they can achieve. We have been humbled and honored to learn with so many young people about their lives, their dreams, and the barriers and opportunities they face every day to achieving their dreams. The question is what we throughout our society will do to meet them where they are and provide the support they need to build upon their strengths and thrive.

Jonathan F. Zaff

BACKGROUND

Educational credentials and work experience are two cornerstones that help young people build a foundation for adult success. Youth who have neither—those who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET)—are at a substantially heightened risk for long-term unemployment, involvement with the criminal justice system, and use and abuse alcohol and other substances. In the United States, nearly 12 percent of 16-24 year-olds—4.6 million young people—fit this description, costing society $1.1 trillion.[1] Preventing youth from disconnecting, or helping them to reconnect once they have disconnected, can therefore have substantial social and economic benefits.

NEET youth are a diverse group. They come from vastly different backgrounds, with an array of experiences, and traverse various pathways into and out of educational institutions and employment opportunities. One subset of NEET youth, youth who have left high school without graduating, have a particularly high risk of continuing a downward trajectory. However, research shows that these same youth have the potential to succeed academically and vocationally if they receive social and institutional supports that align with their strengths and needs.[2]

Leaving school is not an immutable state. Young people do, indeed, re-engage and succeed in high school and beyond. Nationally, as many as two-thirds of young people who leave school without graduating obtain a high school diploma or GED within 10 years.[3] In recent years, a few states have begun analyzing the re-engagement experiences of students who had previously left school. These studies point to the need for targeted efforts focused on helping to initiate and sustain young people's re-engagement in school. For instance, in Colorado, approximately one-third of the more than 15,000 youth who left school re-enrolled by the following year, but only 15 percent were still enrolled (or had graduated) a year later.[4] A similar dynamic is seen in Utah where 22 percent of those who had left school re-enrolled within the year, but only a little more than 7 percent had graduated within six years.[5]

"…that understanding young people's lived experiences, in their own words, and building upon their strengths, is essential to designing optimal responses to the challenges they face. And, that relationships—with caring adults and with peers—are critical to encouraging every young person's healthy development. These relationships, particularly when embedded in supportive programming, can reconnect NEET youth with pathways that lead toward adult success."

Since 2014, when we published *Don't Call Them Dropouts*, the Center for Promise has delved into these issues through numerous qualitative and quantitative studies. Young people's stories feature themes of adversity and unmet needs as well as of opportunity and support. Our team has been honored to hear from more than 6,000 young people through surveys and interviews in communities throughout the country and to share their voices with the nation.

The Center's work over the last four years has led to two key insights that continue to guide our work. One, that understanding young people's lived experiences, in their own words, and building upon their strengths, is essential to designing optimal responses to the challenges they face. And two, that relationships—with caring adults and with peers—are critical to encouraging every young person's healthy development. These relationships, particularly when embedded in supportive programming, can reconnect NEET youth with pathways that lead toward adult success.

The Center's work examines why young people left school, what factors contribute to their return, and what can be done to re-engage more youth in ways that lead not just to high school graduation but to sustainable work. Findings from previous reports illustrate the following key points.

High School Graduation: Necessary but not Sufficient

FIGURE 1

It is important to note that, while young people who leave school before graduating are at high risk for continuing disconnection, enabling them to complete high school is not sufficient in today's economy. Richard Reeves, senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, has found time and again that there is a thick glass ceiling for social mobility, with those on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder rarely having the tools at hand to break through. The Horatio Alger story of self-determined social mobility is currently a far-off dream.[6] Practitioners and policymakers must be aware that multiple, sustained interventions are needed for NEET youth to break through the social and economic glass ceiling, giving them a chance for social mobility.

Career pathways programs that include supported work experiences are one tool in the social-mobility toolbox. The prevailing thinking is that career pathways programs should focus on education and skills training, personal and life skills, and career management strategies (e.g., how to find, interview for, and keep a job). However, based on the work that the Center for Promise has done to understand the lived experience of youth who disconnect from and reconnect to school, we would add an important fourth component: strengthening the constellation of relationships that a young person has that help them navigate life and work; what we call a *web of support.*

A Youth-Centered Approach to Reconnection

All youth, including NEET youth, have strengths that enable success later in life. With that foundation, the Center for Promise has sought to better understand the types of supports NEET youth need and develop effective strategies for providing these supports. Specifically, the Center has been working to understand the reasons NEET youth disconnect from school and work, the supports they need, and the practices and programs that can be implemented to reconnect them to pathways that allow them to thrive in school, work, and life. Our research leads us to recommend that education and workforce decision-makers use the following three questions as their guide:

1. Who are young people who leave high school without graduating? (And why have they left school and/or are not employed?)

2. What do these young people need to get back on positive educational and vocational pathways?

3. How can "we"—practitioners, policymakers, philanthropists, and other caring adults—offer these groups of young people the supports they need?

By taking a youth-centered approach—which involves engaging young people directly—we can begin to uncover important insights in these areas. This report will provide insights about each of these questions derived from multiple mixed-methods studies that the Center for Promise has conducted over the past four years. We start with a description about who NEET youth are and their lived experiences, the theoretical foundation we use to understand their lived experiences, the supports NEET youth need based on their lived experiences, and examples of programs and initiatives that can provide these supports. We conclude with recommendations about what policymakers and practitioners can do to support NEET youth on productive educational and career pathways.
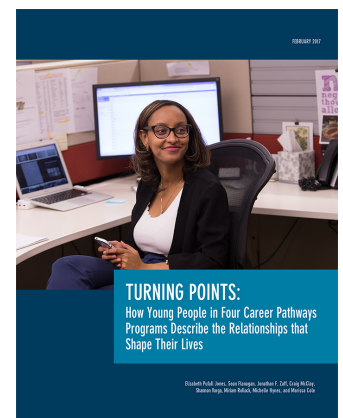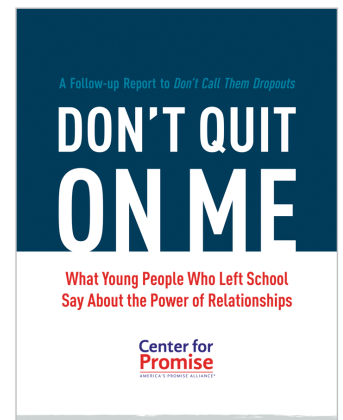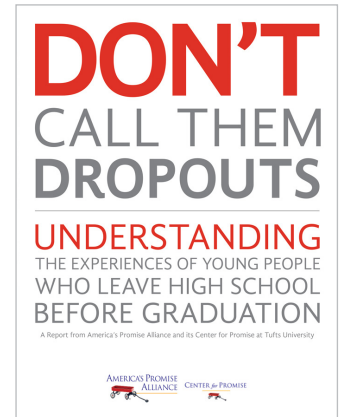
UNDERSTANDING NEET YOUTH

Before conducting our studies, we looked into the existing research on young people who leave school before graduating. Several previous studies had examined a variety of factors—both internal (in the individual) and external (in school, families, and communities)—that contribute to youth leaving school.[7] Russell Rumberger, one of the nation's leading researchers on high school dropout and graduation, provided a framework for understanding why young people disengage from school. His framework includes individual attributes and attitudes, institutional factors in schools, out of school time programs, other community institutions, and the people within and outside these institutions who interact with youth on a consistent basis. Rumberger's efforts have provided tremendous insights into what can be done to promote educational excellence among all young people.[8]

By comparison, very little research had focused on understanding the young people themselves. While there has been some useful and influential work done, such as the *Silent Epidemic*, we found that far too little was known about the lived experiences of young people who struggled to stay in school: their perspectives, their needs, and their aspirations. Our belief is that prevention and intervention initiatives must meet young people where they are in life and acknowledge where they have been. The existing research did not provide sufficient insights. Instead, we determined that we needed to take an in-depth look into the lives of young people whose journeys to adult success had been interrupted, and for whom traditional pathways had not worked. That determination led us to conduct a series of studies that have provided insights into young people's experiences as they navigate leaving and returning to high school, and finding their way from graduation into the workplace.

Why Youth Leave School: Adversity, Responsibility, and Strength

In our first two studies, *Don't Call Them Dropouts* and *Don't Quit on Me*, we surveyed nearly 6,000 young people in all 50 states and conducted group and individual interviews with 333 young people in 19 cities around the country. The purpose of these two studies was to understand the lives of young people who leave school without graduating, with the qualitative interviews providing a deeper set of insights into the experiences of young people in the cities being studied.[9]

Based on a systematic analysis of the survey and interview data, we learned that young people in our studies who left school experienced an overwhelming level of adversity in their lives. Young people who interrupted their education experienced an average of 5.3 adversities—e.g., giving birth or fathering a child, experiencing depression or anxiety, becoming homeless—nearly double the 2.7 for those who stayed in school. Some adversity can be helpful developmentally, providing learning opportunities and training grounds for expressing resilience. However, numerous studies on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) show that indicators of health and wellness worsen when a young person experiences three or more.

Considering that any one of the adversities that we assessed could knock a typical person off a positive pathway, it is sobering to consider what it would feel like to experience five or more of these adversities during adolescence. Beyond the numbers, these adversities point toward life stories in which young people are forced to make choices between school and exigent circumstances. Time and again, young people described leaving school because of a sick parent, a sibling in need, or navigating a dearth of food and housing. Notably, none of these experiences happened in isolation. Young people often described how one adverse experience led to another and then yet another. Adversity carried into the school building, where some students feared for their safety walking to school or while in the building. Others were faced with ultimatums to choose between basic needs and family caregiving, on one hand, and school attendance on the other. Showing up at school was in conflict with other priorities.

In the midst of these stories about adversity, we also heard a common refrain about young people's resilience and potential to thrive. From an analysis of our qualitative data from *Don't Call Them Dropouts*, using the social and emotional competencies framework that has been proposed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL),[10] we found that the youth in our study had many of these core strengths. The difference between them and their peers who stayed in school was that they had to direct their strengths toward other, non-school goals that were more salient to their lives, such as financially supporting their families and ensuring that a family member's health care needs were being met. Education simply was not immediately relevant.

Based on these studies and others,[11] we have no reason to believe that young people who leave school have less potential than those who remain and complete school without interruption. Instead, consistent with the supportive youth systems framework described in the following section, the question is how society can provide sufficient resources that align with the needs and encourage the strengths of youth who leave school. When that occurs, we would expect academic and vocational goals to become more salient in ways that enable more young people to succeed in school, work, and life.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

## Supportive Youth Systems and Positive Youth Development

Our studies are predicated on the understanding that all children and youth (and their families) have strengths that can propel them to educational, vocational, and overall life success. Furthermore, one can only understand why and how a young person is the person that she or he is by understanding the dynamic relation between that youth and the contexts (i.e., family, school, faith-based, etc.) within which s/he is embedded.

Context, though, is not a homogeneous entity. Instead, each young person is embedded within a multi-layered ecology of contexts that is filled with people with whom the young people interact during their days and weeks, and places within which young people live and grow.[12] Beyond these proximal factors, those working with youth should be aware of the less direct, but no less important, factors occurring throughout their ecology, such as how teachers are trained, what rules school districts design and implement in schools, the public policies passed, and the cultural norms that flow through society.

Recognizing the dynamic relation among all of these factors, one cannot solely focus on one factor (such as school) to optimize a young person's development. By placing the young person at the center of any inquiry or action, one can then understand how to align the assets of that surrounding ecology with the needs and strengths of that young person. This type of thinking goes beyond strengthening or reforming school systems, health care systems, or social welfare systems. Instead, the focus is on the full developmental system (which includes all of the various contexts and proximal factors) within which a young person is embedded, a *youth system*.[13] When assets are aligned in that youth system, it is considered a *supportive youth system*. This developmental process is consistent with theories of positive youth development.

The task, then, for most effectively supporting youth is to understand deeply the lived experience of a given young person, determine what supports the young person needs to be on positive developmental pathways, and determine what programs and policies could be enacted to increase the likelihood that the young person receives those supports.

FIGURE 2: POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT FROM A SUPPORTIVE YOUTH SYSTEM PERSPECTIVE[14]
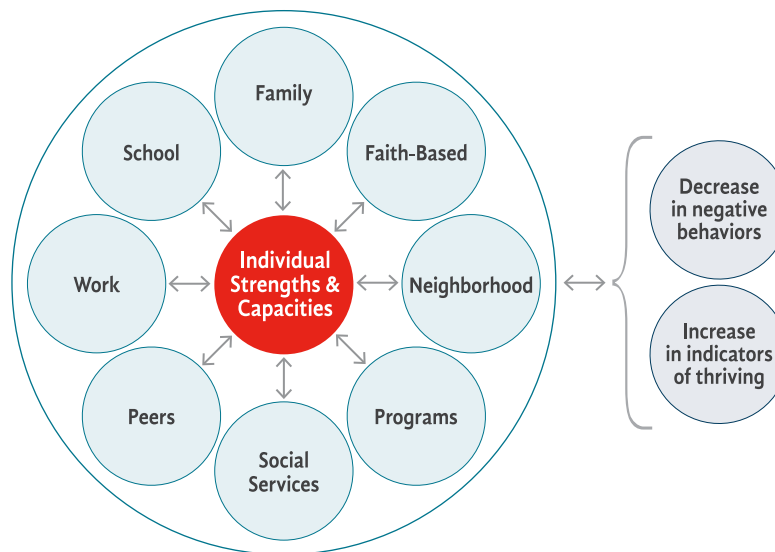

For most NEET youth, everyday interactions with friends, family, staff in re-engagement programs, and people in communities can provide them with the supports that can buffer against their adversities. These individuals care about the young people, but the support they provide goes well beyond caring. Consistent with evidence-based social support frameworks, the young people in our studies described adults and peers providing tangible supports like food, money, and clothes, and helping them navigate the opportunities and boundaries that they inevitably face. The adults and peers also set expectations for what the young people could achieve and held the young people accountable for meeting these expectations. And, yes, the adults provided emotional support that is so foundational to anyone's well-being. The young people described how they mattered to someone, that there were people in their lives who cared about them and looked out for them.

Anchors and Webs

The supports provided by these adults could buffer against the adversities the young people faced, but we also found a point at which the adversity was too much for everyday interactions to protect against the adversities. This "adversity cliff" necessitated a more professionalized set of individuals who could work with the young person through trauma and related mental health challenges, among other complex problems with which they were confronted. That is, relationships always matter, but the intensity of supports derived from the relationships will inevitably need to meet the intensity of the adversity that young people face.

FIGURE 3: A SAMPLE WEB OF SUPPORT & AN EXAMPLE OF A CORE WITHIN A WEB
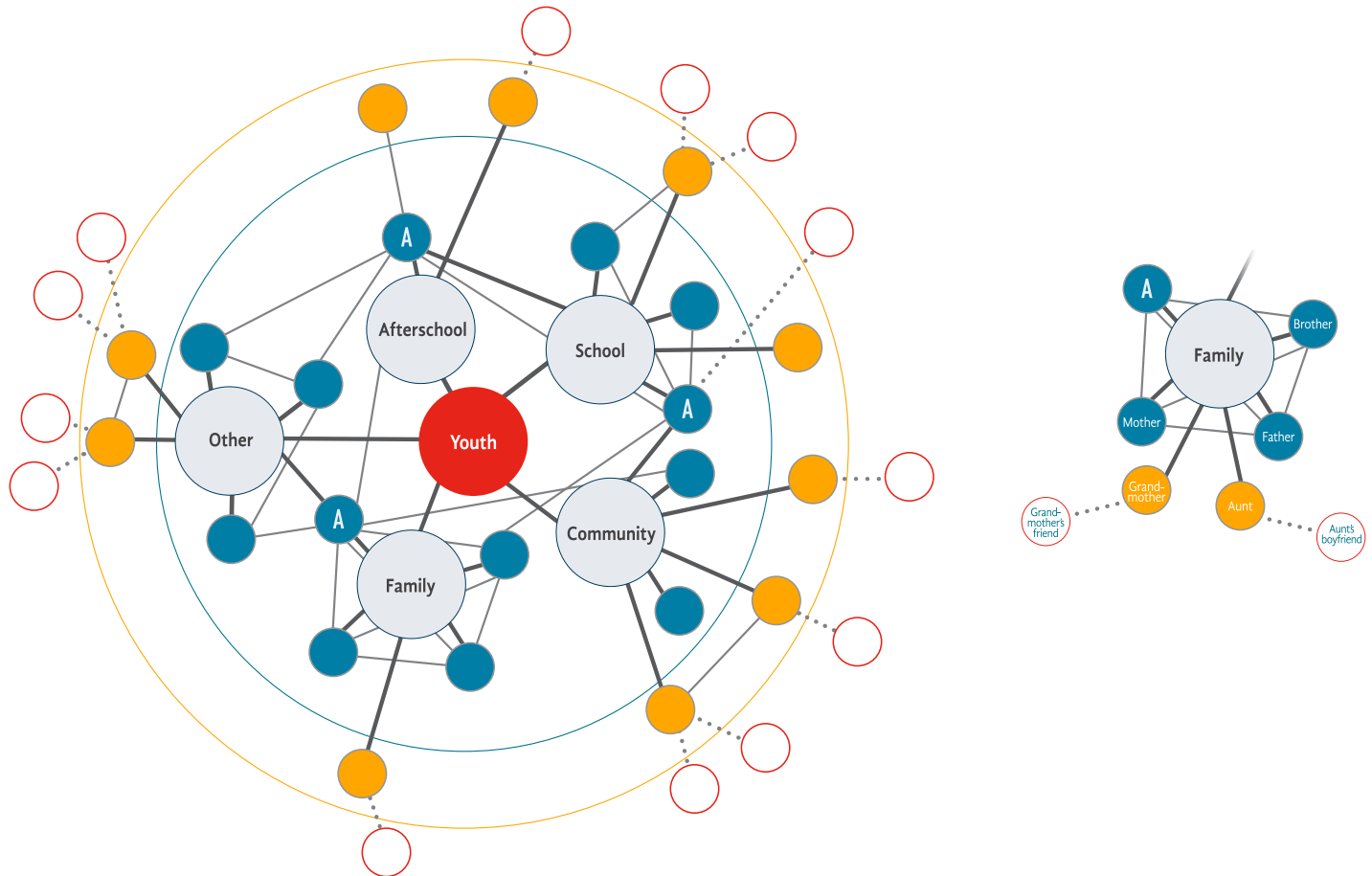
In addition, there needed to be at least one person who they could turn to no matter what. This "anchoring relationship" provided a base from which a young person could build a broader network of relationships. Previous research on relationships has largely examined interactions between one adult and one young person, whether the relationship occurred in isolation (e.g., a formal mentoring program) or embedded within a broader relationship context (e.g., teacher-student interactions in classrooms or a group mentoring program). Research has also examined the structure of the networks of relationships for a young person (i.e., their social network), but not the quality of those relationships. But just as each individual is embedded within a multi-layered ecology and that individual influences and is influenced by that ecology, each relationship is likewise embedded within that ecology of relationships, supports, opportunities, and barriers. Somewhat surprisingly, relationships are not often studied within similar theoretical perspectives.

Thus, the Center for Promise developed the *web of support* framework, pulling from relationship, social support, social capital, and social network theories and studies, which provides a more holistic way of considering relationships. This framework more accurately portrays how young people function in relationships and provides deeper insights into how young people access the supports that they need to thrive.[15]

Understanding the components of the *web of support* framework can help youth-serving adults intentionally build the kinds of relationships that benefit young people's development. As illustrated in Figure 3, they include:

Youth agency and characteristics. Young people are active agents in their own development and in relationships with the people with whom they interact. This agency means that a young person will intentionally engage and disengage from peers and adults throughout their webs. The characteristics of each individual in the relationship affect the quality of the relationship, and therefore the effectiveness, of the social supports that relationship provides.

4. **Relationships among adults and peers within the web.** A web will be weak if all connections are to and from the youth in the center. Instead, a strong web would consist of connections among the adults and peers in a young person's life; for example, between parents and a young person's teachers, among friends, or between mentors and a youth's case worker. Going beyond the youth-to-adult relationships also makes more clear the indirect connections that could result in resources, if the young person were to be connected. The social capital literature describes this as bridging capital.[16] Also consistent with social capital theories, we can look at the frequency of interactions among all within the web in order to distinguish between long-lasting and fleeting relationships. This is what might be called strong ties and weak ties.[17]

5. **Supports provided.** Going beyond the number and strength of connections, a *web of support* framework considers—consistent with social support literature—that all adults have the potential to provide at least one type of support to youth. Because these supports are provided within a system of relationships, understanding the support(s) provided by one adult can have implications for the impact of supports provided by other adults throughout a young person's web.

6. **Variation in importance.** Certain adults might have an elevated role in a young person's web, compared to other adults. This could be one person or several people within and across the various contexts within which the young person lives, learns, and grows. These individuals, what we call anchors, are the ones to whom young people feel they could go to for anything, who can help navigate throughout individual contexts and/or help them bridge to other contexts, provide a sense of unconditional support, and provide young people with a sense that they matter to someone. In addition, for youth experiencing heightened levels of adversity, a more professionalized adult or group of adults might be necessary.

# Providing NEET Youth with the Supports Necessary to Thrive

If a *web of support* appears to be essential to the re-engagement and longer-term success of youth who have left school, a logical next question is how to create these more robust webs for NEET youth. From our analysis of the data from *Don't Quit on Me* and *Turning Points*, we found that programs (and schools) play an important role in helping to build webs of support for re-engaging youth. Programs can have multiple adults work with a given young person and connect that young person to opportunities outside of the walls of the program.

One young person, "Rosie," talked about what her life was like before she left school. At the age of 14, she "was in the system." Although she described few supports before leaving school, she felt supported by the charter school she attended prior to high school. High school was a shock to her system. She quickly went through a series of four schools, because "it didn't work out." Although she felt some support from the vice principal at her final high school, she says that she did not get enough of the attention that she needed. In addition to her challenges at school, her foster parent was using drugs, and her social worker was telling her to just stick it out until she aged out of the system.

FIGURE 4: ROSIE'S STORY—DISENGAGEMENT
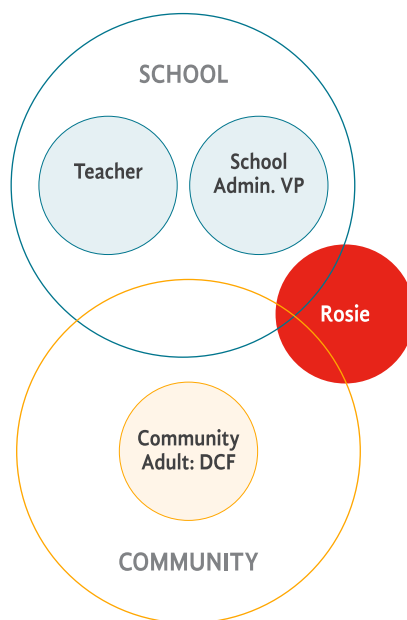
ROSIE'S STORY—ENGAGEMENT
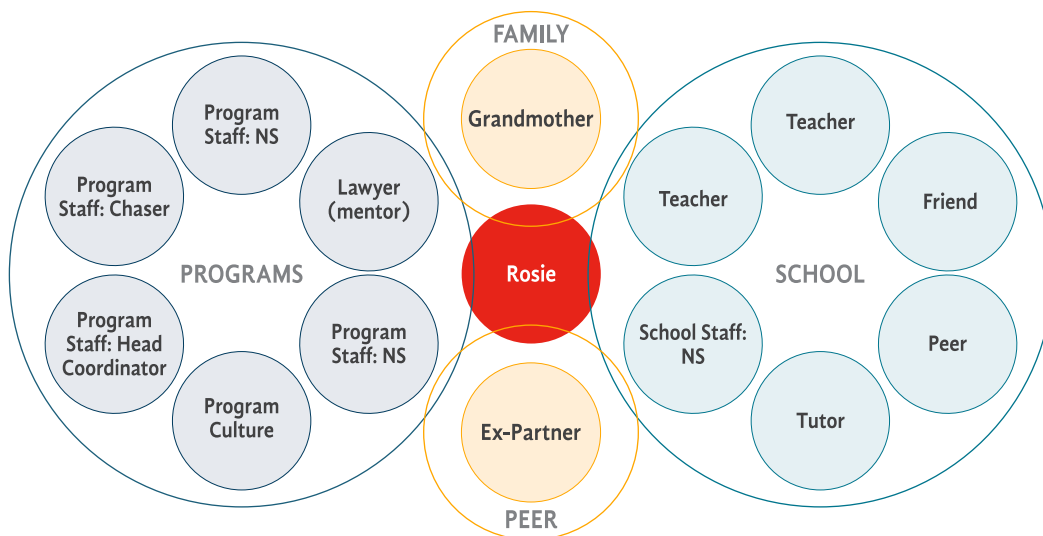
At one of the lowest points during her period of disengagement, Rosie connected with a re-engagement program through her grandmother (who used to work there), and her ex- boyfriend who attended the program while on probation following incarceration. When she spoke about the program—which combines an alternative school with a career readiness program—she said:

> **"They call you by your name. They know who you are. It's like, 'Ooh, I like what you're wearing today. What's going on?' That's what I mean. It's that connection versus you're just walking in. It's just like, 'Hey, good morning. How's your morning? Good? Okay. That's good. Get to work…'"**

This program surrounds each young person with a variety of individuals who offer an array of supports. And the support they offer is relentless, something that many youth we spoke with, including Rosie, never experienced before.

> **"…So that's one of the main things they do. They actually literally chase you around. They will go to your house because they've gone to my house and asked me, 'Why are you not going to school? Is there something bothering you? Are you not feeling comfortable?' So they always make sure that you're in your best zone to come in. So that's one of the things. They zone you in."**

Rosie's words illustrate how support, at the program site and beyond, can encourage young people to persist toward school- and work-related goals. With this understanding of the potential importance of programs and schools in a young person's *web of supports*, we now consider ways that programs and full communities can provide these supports to youth, specifically youth who have left high school without graduating.

How Programs Optimize Re-engagement

The Center's previous studies found that there is often a disconnect between efforts to provide comprehensive supports to young people and efforts that prepare young people for the workforce. Therefore, our focus in the following section is on career pathways, not just academic re-engagement or youth development programs.

The typical theory of action for career pathways programs, including those focused on disengaged youth, involves delivering skill building and programmatic elements to promote marketable, life, and career management skills that should lead to a successful career pathway. Examples of typical activities include didactic skill instruction, resume assistance, networking, mock interviewing, and assistance with a job search.

What's missing, though, in many programs are the relational components that undergird all that a program offers, such as understanding the needs and strengths of a given young person, either providing or guiding her to the services and supports that align with these needs and strengths, and connecting youth with recent alums as role models and additional guides. These additional supports should promote the social and emotional well-being that is so essential to being a productive worker and engaged citizen, as well as having the *web of supports* that will carry and support them through the program and into the workforce.

Several promising elements of initiatives that optimize youth re-engagement emerged. They include:

- **A relationships-first approach.** Before a young person can learn math or show up to work, they need to feel connected to the people within the program, perceive that they matter to the people in the program, and that they trust the people in the program. Adult program leaders are also positioned to help youth navigate the challenges and opportunities they confront within the program and throughout their communities. The best programs are those that integrate relationships into their theories of action, hire adults who work with youth in authentically youth-centered ways, train adults on how to engage youth, and create opportunities for adults to engage with youth throughout their programming. But focusing on relationships does not stop at the front door: relationships between adults and youth endure throughout the youth's time in the program. Some programs even continue these relationships after youth move onto other experiences, continuing to guide them. Consistent with a webs of support framework,[18] exemplar programs go beyond facilitating individual relationships, connecting youth with multiple relationships, both to echo the benefits of any one relationship, but also for one adult to complement the support that another adult is providing.

APPROACH

The Center for Promise took a multi-dimensional approach to understanding the types of initiatives that can optimize youth re-engagement. This approach involved:

- Scans of re-engagement efforts and career pathways programs;
- Interviews with youth about their experiences in re-engagement and career pathways programs; and
- Site visits, including observations, archival document review, and key respondent interviews of a selection of programs around the country.

- **Educational experiences that fit young people's lives.** Youth who leave school often have turbulent lives that can make following a traditional school day schedule difficult. Jobs to support their families or caring for a family member may have led to their disengagement from school the first time. Programs therefore need to be flexible in the timing of educational experiences and provide individualized lessons that are specific to the needs and strengths of a given young person. Flexibility does not, however, mean lower standards. Programs should have high expectations and provide young people with the supports to reach those expectations.

- **Work-readiness strategies and practical work experience.** Experiential learning is potentially beneficial to all youth, but re-engagement and career pathways programs are particularly intentional about providing work experiences as part of their theory of action. The benefits are multiple, such as providing opportunities for adults to engage with the youth in a different setting (i.e., through work) and gaining valuable work and life skills that can be transported to other experiences, such as teamwork and problem solving, as well as building the habits of showing up to work.

- **Comprehensive support services.** Youth who re-engage with educational and vocational experiences bring with them the issues that originally knocked them off course. Mental health services, food and housing assistance, and trauma-informed practices are just a few of the ways that programs can provide the supports that the youth need in order to remain engaged and continue on a positive educational and vocational pathway. Although some programs provide all of these services under one roof, many partner with other organizations in the community to capitalize on existing assets before creating new, but duplicative ones.

Numerous youth development programs throughout the country help to strengthen the assets of young people, assets that should be helpful for the workforce. However, there are rarely initiatives that provide experiences and knowledge about expressing those assets in work environments or how to plan and pursue a career path. By combining these two components (comprehensive, youth development supports and career pathways)—as the Citi Foundation's Pathways to Progress grantees profiled here do—youth who have left school can be on trajectories toward stable careers that enable economic self-sufficiency and social mobility.

For a more detailed review of these elements and the related research, as well as other examples from the Citi Foundation's Pathways to Progress initiative, see *Relationships Come First* and *Turning Points*.

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) offer one way to build this infrastructure.[19] A CCI is a local, organized group of institutions and individuals that coordinate resources as part of a common agenda and towards a common goal, tailored to the unique strengths and needs of any given community.[20] The subsequent actions strengthen and mobilize the community's human, institutional, social, cultural, and financial capital. Assets are then deployed throughout a county, city, or neighborhood to benefit all who are the focus of the CCI; for example, benefiting all disconnected youth in a city. While ideas about systemic actions have been around for more than a century, CCIs have gained considerable momentum in the last decade.

As an example of how such efforts can support NEET youth, the U.S. Department of Labor's Youth Opportunity Grant (YOG) Initiative provided grants to 36 communities throughout the country to build community capacity to support all youth on their pathway to educational and vocational success. YOG had a particular focus on NEET youth. An independent evaluation showed, among other findings, substantive impacts on educational attainment, employment rates, and earnings.[21] Although YOG ended in the mid-2000s, a subset of the 36 communities continues to raise awareness about the needs of NEET youth and the types of policies and practices that can support them.

In addition, the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions funds and coordinates a network of CCIs focused on NEET youth, providing examples of how communities can come together to support NEET youth (although no causal, impact studies have been conducted on their effects). From our own systematic review of CCIs, we have found that CCIs should gain a deep understanding about the lived experience of youth, align policies and programs to that understanding, and develop a sustainable infrastructure that creates a community's capacity to deliver those supports. For a detailed discussion of CCIs and best practices, see *Comprehensive Community Initiatives: The Impact on Population-Level Children, Youth, and Family Outcomes, A Systematic Review.*[22]

CITI FOUNDATION YOUTH WORKFORCE FUND: SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE COLLEGE AND CAREER PATHWAYS FOR YOUTH

In 2015, the Citi Foundation launched the *Youth Opportunity Fund*, now the *Youth Workforce Fund*, providing grants to nonprofits working in innovative ways to place low-income young adults on a path toward college and career success in 15 cities across the United States.

Three grantees, Cincinnati Youth Collaborative, The Opportunity Network, and Southeast Technical Institute (Southeast Tech), are profiled in this report. While each has its own unique mission and goals, understanding the assets and needs of the young people they support and leveraging the power of relationships to positively impact a young person's education, career, and life are common threads throughout the programs.

About the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative

Cincinnati Youth Collaborative (CYC) is a partnership between public schools, volunteers, and the business community with a mission to empower youth from economically disadvantaged communities to overcome structural barriers to education, career, and life success. Since its founding in the 1980s, CYC has remained steadfast in its efforts to develop a deep understanding of the young people it serves. CYC facilitates relationships between the youth of the Cincinnati region and caring and encouraging adults, while engaging schools and families as essential partners in this effort.

CYC considers relationships to be at the core of their programming, offering a continuum of supports by connecting youth to a team of caring adults to help them graduate high school and persist through obtaining a postsecondary credential. Workforce readiness has also become a focus for the organization, and in 2012, it merged with Jobs for Cincinnati's Graduates to strengthen the pipeline of college, career, and workforce readiness programming being offered. CYC's success can be attributed to its focus on deeply understanding the young people they serve, fostering relationships with mentors, career specialists, and college advisors, including parents and families in their work, and possessing a "willingness to course correct" to respond to their students' needs.

To learn more about how CYC encourages youth to pursue multiple pathways to postsecondary success, see page iii.

About the Opportunity Network

The Opportunity Network® (OppNet), a nonprofit based in New York City driving national impact, was founded in 2003 to combat the structural barriers impeding access to meaningful higher education and career development opportunities. Specifically, OppNet was designed to improve access for young people from underrepresented and low-income communities. It provides intensive career development and work-based learning opportunities, targeted college counseling, and helps young people leverage the networks, relationships, and social capital necessary to actualize their inherent potential.

OppNet's signature programs are the Career Fluency® Partnerships program and the OppNet Fellows program, both of which use the organization's Career Fluency® curriculum. The Career Fluency® curriculum is rooted in four pillars of readiness: (1) College Access, Transition, and Success; (2) Professional and Workplace Skills; (3) Career Exposure; and (4) Networks and Social Capital. Among the core components of Career Fluency,® OppNet's unique value is its acute focus on relationship quality, social networks, and social capital as key levers to propel students' long-term success through college and career.

To learn more about how the Opportunity Network provides anchors and webs of support to young people, see page i.

About Southeast Technical Institute

Southeast Technical Institute (Southeast Tech) has embarked on an innovative partnership with the school district's Career and Technical Education Academy (SFSD-CTE), to prepare Sioux Falls young people for sustainable careers in the region. The programming focuses on 16-to-24 year-olds from low-to-moderate income families and/or who are at risk of not completing high school or post secondary training. The partnership leverages SFSD-CTE Academy's deep connections with the Sioux Falls youth-serving community and CTE specialization and Southeast Tech's 50 years of experience in workforce development and postsecondary training.

This partnership provide students with hands-on experience, industry-specific skills training, and a career coach to support them on the school-to-career pathway. Preparation toward these pathways is grounded heavily in certificate and credential granting course curricula, personalized career development (e.g., resume writing, interviewing) and advisement, and work-based learning opportunities (e.g., apprenticeships, internships). The coaching relationship is a critical component of the programming and they have developed two specialized positions—a career coach and an internship coordinator—to work closely with young people to build these relationships.

To learn more about how Southeast Tech developed stronger ties between education and industry to support young people's career success, see page v.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING NEET YOUTH

Looking back on the last four years of research at the Center for Promise, including what we've learned from Citi Foundation's Pathways to Progress partners and similar programs serving NEET youth, here are three investments community leaders could make to enable more young people to make successful transitions through high school and into the workforce.

- **Before making decisions, understand who your community's young people are, drawing on multiple sources of data that include hearing from youth directly.** The Center for Promise team has been honored that the young people with whom we work have given us deep insights into their authentic lived experiences. In addition to learning about the richness of their lives, we also have learned that young people's experiences vary greatly. Knowing the youth in our studies does not mean that we understand deeply the youth in all communities. Decision-makers often develop policies and programs without deep insight into who young people are, what they need, and what they can achieve. We propose that federal and foundation grant programs should require, and invest in, evidence that grantees understand the lived experiences of the youth they serve.

- **Focus on external adversity to unleash young people's innate potential.** All youth have the potential to thrive in school and in life. What thriving means may vary from person to person (e.g., an aptitude for physics or poetry or visual art), but all youth have potential. The adversities that youth endure do not equate to lacking potential; nor does an abundance of enriching opportunities equate to greater potential. Too many of our policies, though, focus on resolving supposed deficits, as if they are within a young person rather than in his or her environment. By resolving adversities, youth are able to set and persevere toward salient goals that put them on productive educational and vocational pathways.

- **Double down on relationships.** Relationships should be an explicit part of supports for young people and emphasized in the strategic plans and programming of an organization or initiative. Institutions are important, but, at the end of the day, people drive outcomes. The Center's quantitative and qualitative studies emphasize that relationships are paramount; they are the make or break ingredient for whether a young person will stay in school, re-engage in school if they have left, and embark on a positive career trajectory. Providing funding for formal mentoring is not the full answer. As the Center's work and related emerging literature shows, the story of the super hero doing everything for a child is just that—a story. Instead, young people need a web of support filled with adults across the different contexts of a young person's life to provide the emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal supports that we all need.

CONCLUSION

Over the past several years, the Center for Promise has sought to learn about the lives of young people who have left school, by hearing from and learning with young people themselves. We believe that developing a deep understanding of who young people are, and giving young people a say in what they need, leads to developing the most effective strategies for optimizing young people's educational and vocational outcomes. We have explored who NEET youth are to create an intimate portrait of their lives, to understand what supports they need in that context, and to recommend how to provide these supports through policies, programs, and practices.

What we have observed is the remarkable strength so many young people express in their everyday lives to push back against the tremendous barriers they confront every day, the responsibility for themselves and their families that they put on their own shoulders, and the dreams so many of them have to succeed in school, work, and life. When there are adults in their lives who meet them where they are, who can build trusting relationships, and who can provide the social supports that these young people need, NEET youth re-engage and are well-positioned to achieve these dreams.

Unfortunately, too few young people experience the supports that they need to thrive. Our call-to-arms, then, is for decision-makers (program leaders, principals, school district administrators, elected officials, policymakers, those on the front lines of youth development work) to discover who their communities' young people are—including what their dreams are and what stands in their way—so they can provide powerful support to all young people along their pathways to adulthood.

APPENDIX

In 2015, the Citi Foundation launched The Youth Opportunity Fund, now *The Youth Workforce Fund*, providing grants to nonprofits working in innovative ways to place low-income young adults on a path toward college and career success in 15 cities across the United States. In October 2018, the Citi Foundation announced its fourth cohort of grantees.

Three of the grantees from the 2017 Citi Foundation Pathways to Progress cohort, Cincinnati Youth Collaborative, Southeast Technical Institute (Southeast Tech), and The Opportunity Network, are profiled here. While each program has its own unique mission and set of goals, a consistent focus on understanding the assets and needs of the young people they support, the essentiality of relationship building, and the power of relationships to positively impact a young person's education, career, and life are common threads throughout the programs.

How One Program Provides Anchors and Webs of Support to Young People

About The Opportunity Network

The Opportunity Network® (OppNet), a nonprofit based in New York City driving national student impact through its two core programs, was founded in 2003 by Brian Weinstein and Jessica Pliska, two former classmates at Yale University. Upon embarking on successful careers of their own, Weinstein and Pliska became impassioned by "the systematic exclusion of certain groups of people" in and outside their own industries, recognizing the need to combat the structural barriers impeding access to meaningful higher education and career development opportunities.

The Opportunity Network was designed in response to this and the notion that young people from underrepresented and low-income communities, "regardless of how brilliant they are," are "being excluded from college experiences, career exploration experiences," and the "networks and social capital that really can influence their long-term success," according to OppNet's President and COO, AiLun Ku. Since its founding, OppNet has maintained its commitment to serving young people by breaking down barriers to college and career success, providing intensive career development and work-based learning opportunities, targeted college counseling, and helping young people leverage the networks, relationships, and social capital necessary to actualize their inherent potential.

"Relationships are at the core of who we are as an organization. Our curriculum, in terms of our networks and social capital piece, is an explicit kind of connection to how much we value relationships, and so that really influences how we hire and how our staff support our Fellows. The principles of relationship building and cultivating are really how everything moves."

AiLun Ku, President and COO, The Opportunity Network

OppNet serves youth and communities through two complementary programmatic avenues, the Career Fluency® Partnerships program and OppNet Fellows program, both of which apply the organization's Career Fluency® curriculum to guide their work with youth. Career Fluency® represents the guiding light of college and career readiness indicators that OppNet strives to promote among students. Career Fluency® is composed of "four pillars" of readiness: (1) College Access, Transition, and Success, (2) Professional and Workplace Skills, (3) Career Exposure, and (4) Networks and Social Capital. Among the core components of Career Fluency,® OppNet considers its unique value proposition within the youth college and career readiness field to be their acute focus on relationship quality, social networks, and social capital as key levers to propel students' long-term success through college and career.

OppNet's mission to maximize the potential of all students to reach their college and career goals. Relative to other programs and organizations that focus on college access solely, according to AiLun Ku, OppNet's President and COO, "is that [Jessica and Brian, the founders] always wanted to see Fellows through college, and they always wanted to see our students, alongside that, exploring career pathways that are most interesting and also [that] they're most passionate about."

About the Career Fluency® Partnerships Program

In addition to the Fellows program, the Career Fluency® Partnerships program builds the institutional capacity of schools and youth-serving organizations across the country to boost college and career readiness in their young people through tailored integration of OppNet's Career Fluency® curriculum into their models. Each organization engaged with OppNet through its Partnerships program is equipped with a uniquely designed strategy anchored in Career Fluency® to produce desired student outcomes. To date, OppNet has partnered with more than 50 youth-serving organizations, including the NYC Department of Education, Latino U College Access, Boston Prep Charter, College Track, and the I Have Dream Foundation. This year alone, OppNet is engaged in 15 robust, multi-year partnerships with schools and organizations based in 14 cities across the country, reaching more than 2,000 students.
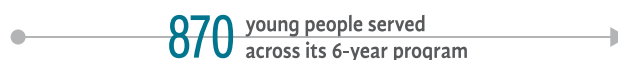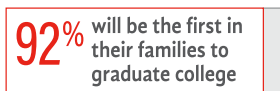
About the OppNet Fellows

The OppNet Fellows program is OppNet's flagship youth-serving program focusing on helping young people navigate "to and through college and into careers," and providing students with six years of intensive programming, and a range of supports tailored to "all of the critical phases of their college and career readiness." OppNet engages young people in the summer prior to 11th grade, following a rigorous application process, and immerses new Fellows in the foundational aspects of the Career Fluency® curriculum. The initial engagement is through OppNet's robust Summer Institute, followed by weekly after-school classes throughout the school-year, alongside college tours, SAT/ACT prep coursework, and college application and financial aid advisement and support.

OppNet's President and COO, AiLun Ku, on the importance of relationships within the Fellows program: "The way we think about relationship building with our Fellows is also about relationship building with the communities that are supporting our Fellows that we don't get to see every day, right? Making sure we understand what supports they have at home that we can continue to leverage and what supports they have at school. Navigating those relationships that already exist so we can be a complement to that system is really important."

Therefore, Fellows are supported through their college matriculation, transition, and persistence through formal programming, in-depth semester check-in calls, peer mentoring, virtual programming, and workshops and classes during semester breaks. Students engage in work-based and applied-learning experiences through five summers of paid internships and enrichment programs, bolstered by individualized career guidance. Across all components of the Fellows program, OppNet works "intensely with students to develop their individualized sense of fit…because [of] how much that will continue to play a role in their long-term college and career decision-making," Ku said.

MEET THE YOUNG PEOPLE OPPNET RECRUITS INTO ITS FELLOWS PROGRAM

90% of students qualify for free/reduced lunch

$4million+ in scholarships and grants have been awarded to the Class of 2022

90% secure meaningful employment or graduate school admission within six months of graduating

92% will be the first in their families to graduate college

870 young people served across its 6-year program

Encouraging Multiple Pathways to Postsecondary Success in Cincinnati

In Cincinnati in the 1980s, a community came together to resolve its high school dropout rate crisis and better support its young people on pathways to graduate from high school. While the partnership has evolved, relationships between the public schools and business community *and* among youth and caring adults embedded in the schools, remain the key components to making the Collaborative work.

About the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative

Cincinnati Youth Collaborative (CYC) is a partnership between public schools, volunteers, and the business community with a mission to empower youth from economically disadvantaged communities to overcome structural barriers to education, career, and life success. Since its founding in the 1980s, CYC has continuously refined its model, but has remained steadfast in its efforts to develop a deep understanding of the young people it serves. CYC's approach is not a "one-size-fits-all model" and the student supports and strategic relationships have developed over time. CYC facilitates relationships between the youth of the Cincinnati region and caring and encouraging adults, while engaging schools and families as essential partners in this effort.

CYC considers relationships to be at the core of their programming. It offers a continuum of supports by connecting youth to a team of caring adults to help them graduate high school and persist through obtaining a postsecondary credential. Success is measured by attainment of one of CYC's "three E's"—enrollment, employment, or enlistment in the military.

CYC now has more than 1,500 volunteers and 100 business and community partners serving 5,700 young people per year.

About CYC's Programming

CYC uses a three-tiered model that includes mentoring, college and career success, and workforce readiness, and offers a full range of activities and services from 2nd grade through college. According to David Plogmann, Chief Development, Marketing and Strategy Officer, these program elements are "stacked and layered" for each student in a way to best serve that student. By offering a menu of programs, CYC is able to adapt their services to meet the unique needs of each student. Ninety-five percent of high school seniors participating in CYC programs consistently graduate on time from high school.

To develop a deeper understanding of the young people they serve and best match them with supports, CYC adopts a team-based approach at the school level, with teams of advisors placed in the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) and the surrounding metro area. College advisors provide college access services such as FAFSA support, ACT prep, and essay writing support. The work readiness program focuses on career exploration, leadership development, and workforce experiences. Collaboration with parents and family members is also considered by the program staff to be critical to the success of the program.

In the most recent academic year, CYC was able to serve 5,700 students from five school districts. Together with the schools and districts with which they work, CYC first identifies a need and then determines the appropriate service model and funding plan for implementation.

A Focus on College Success

CYC's decision to focus on college success was born out of the realization that a high school diploma, or even some college, would not guarantee success in career and life. College completion rates for first-generation college-students, the majority of the students CYC serves, are well below overall national averages for college completion. As an organization, CYC began considering how to best support young people to persist and attain a post secondary degree. This led CYC to consider how to build relationships among students at the university level. CYC launched a pilot program and ultimately expanded into a college mentoring program. During the current academic year, they are planning to have 350 college mentor-mentee relationships at the University of Cincinnati Blue Ash and Cincinnati State Career and Technical College. These mentoring relationships will also help to identify additional supports that these first-generation students need to persist through college.

CYC's longevity and success can be attributed to their focus on deeply understanding the young people they serve, fostering relationships with mentors, career specialists, and college advisors, including parents and families in their work, and possessing a "willingness to course correct" and be flexible to respond to their students' changing needs.

The Emergence of Multiple Pathways: Fostering Workforce Readiness

Within the past decade, CYC has realized that college is not always the best fit for every young person, and that they had to "paint the full picture of possibilities" to young people by offering clear visibility to the full range of career pathways. Plogman also acknowledges "…there are multiple pathways to certain goals that are just going to depend upon the individual circumstances of that unique student." By starting early, often in seventh or eighth grade, they help guide the young people on a path, supporting them along the way. Youth are empowered to make their own choices and are not forced into a particular workforce or college track.

In order to best support young people, CYC advisors are embedded in their partner schools. Placing an advisor, or in many cases a team of advisors, in schools has allowed CYC to have a greater understanding of what is happening day-to-day in the lives of the students they serve, as well as to become acclimated with the different cultures and needs of each school and its student population.

CYC credits this approach of building relationships among the students, schools, and advisors, to a belief in allowing students to be "truthful about what their heart desires." Once an advisor knows what interests a student, advisors can seek opportunities to help advance young people's understanding of the field, through suggesting a school that has a specific field of study or connecting a young person with an apprenticeship.

Jobs for Cincinnati's Graduates

Workforce readiness has increasingly become more of a focus for the organization, and in 2012, CYC merged with Jobs for Cincinnati's Graduates (JCG) in order to strengthen the pipeline of college, career, and workforce readiness programming being offered to young people in Metro Cincinnati.

Jobs for Cincinnati's Graduates, the local affiliate of Jobs for Ohio's Graduates and the national Jobs for America's Graduates, focuses on high school to career transitions. Currently in eleven Cincinnati public schools, JCG consists of a credit-bearing elective course that offers middle and high school students exposure to "extreme career exploration" while teaching "self-confidence-building social skills" and providing service learning experiences using an experiential-based learning model. The competencies addressed and tracked by JCG include "career development, job attainment, job survival, basic competency, leadership and self-development, and personal skill competency." During the senior year of high school, the program includes career exploration, optional summer internships and competitive events. Throughout the program, participants receive intense support from Jobs for Cincinnati's Graduates Career Specialists. Career specialists serve as the "liaison between the students, the teachers and postsecondary opportunities." They also serve as a critical link with parents and strive to be on a first name basis with them and to develop an understanding of the family involvement. Through this program, CYC strives to create a pathway to employment for qualified employees in the in-demand work sectors.

"And I think that what I've learned and what I've been advising the advisors and the guides in the schools is to build relationships. So, when you build relationship, I think that the youth and the kids, the students, and the schools are going to be more apt to be truthful about what their heart desires. And then after they are building those relationships with those students, advisors are able to say, 'Okay, I heard about this opportunity. Maybe we can go to visit this school because it has apprenticeships or the major that some of the kids want to go into.'"

Tracy Stokes, College and Career Success Manager

Students are recommended for the program by an Advisory Committee consisting of the high school principal, counselor, and core subject teachers along with other neighborhood leaders such as a member of the clergy or director of a local youth serving organization. A robust data management system allows the Committee to track demographic and achievement data on the participants, and a broad range of students are selected into the program. Once enrolled, the Advisory Committee can help guide a young person into multiple postsecondary pathways.

CYC also recognizes the importance of starting early: "We think it's super important to get there on the front end, because as with anything, the earlier you're having the conversations, the earlier you can be more proactive and identify the best possible path or paths," Plogmann said. JCG has a middle school program for 7th and 8th graders. After a successful multi-year pilot of the middle school program, CYC is currently expanding this to four additional schools through a continuing partnership with Cincinnati Public Schools.

Students participating in the JCG program receive 12 months of follow up support from Career Specialists to help ensure a successful transition to sustainable employment.

Developing Stronger Ties Between Education and Industry to Put All Young People on a Path to Career Success

About Southeast Technical Institute

With the Sioux Falls economy "screaming for skilled labor," Southeast Technical Institute (Southeast Tech) has embarked on an innovative partnership with the school district's Career and Technical Education Academy (SFSD-CTE), to prepare young people for sustainable careers in the region. The programming focuses on 16-to-24 year-olds from low-to-moderate income families and/or who are at risk of not completing high school or post-secondary training. The partnership leverages SFSD-CTE Academy's deep connections with the Sioux Falls youth-serving community and CTE specialization and Southeast Tech's 50 years of experience in workforce development and postsecondary training.

"You're not talking about college and career, but you're talking about dreams and aspiration."

Sioux Falls currently enjoys a "less than three percent unemployment rate," but a local economy that is in need of a skilled workforce across a number of industries. In addition to those who do not complete high school, there are "around thirty percent of high school graduates who are not pursing any kind of additional skill training beyond high school," according to school district administration. These young people remain unprepared to capitalize on a labor market burgeoning with opportunities for career advancement and upward mobility. A senior administrator at Southeast Tech explained, "For every job in South Dakota that's open right now, we have a third of a person to give them. We don't have nearly the workers we need, especially in the skilled areas."

Southeast Tech and the SFSD-CTE Academy provide students with hands-on experience, industry-specific skills training, and a career coach to support them on the school-to-career pathway. They agree that the coaching relationship is a critical component of their programs.

Supporting Young People on a Path to Career Success

Southeast Tech and SFSD-CTE Academy have developed two specialized positions, a Career Coach and an Internship Coordinator, to facilitate relationships for students by providing district-wide programming on youth workforce development. The Career Coach is positioned to work with high schools across the district to identify those students who lack a plan for after high school based on various academic and career indicators (e.g., completion of ACT/SAT) as well as input from high school counselors and teachers. The Internship Coordinators build relationships between education and industry with the goal of providing students access to meaningful work-based learning opportunities and ensuring that these experiences align with industry demand.

A senior administrator at Southeast Tech explained, "The two [positions] just fell into place together," based on a demand for an Internship Coordinator "who will help us to build relationships with industry, get them to provide us with potential opportunities for students to go off and do an internship while they're still in high school" and a Career Coach to "work with those students on getting those internships and making sure that it's going successfully and then evaluating how well it went." In addition to staff and administrators in the district, the Career Coach and Internship Coordinator are collaborating with Career Advisors, school-based staff supported with funding by the South Dakota Department of Labor, to identify and work with students in need of career

pathways support. Together, these key individuals help young people succeed by operating across the work-based learning system, uniting to provide career exploration, internship and job shadowing, on-the-job training opportunities, financial awareness, interviewing, resume/cover letter and soft skill training, application and job search assistance, and potential funding sources for higher education. Thus far, this approach has "been great. We have connected with industry, we've connected with the high schools, we've had the superintendent of the Sioux Falls School District involved. We've had the state involved. It's like the whole community is coming together and figuring out this is what we need to do."

By partnering across the education and government sectors and designating specialized staff that represent this collaborative approach, Southeast Tech and SFSD-CTE Academy are reimagining methods for preparing young people for multiple education and career pathways. Preparation toward these pathways is grounded heavily in certificate and credential granting course curricula, personalized career development (e.g., resume writing, interviewing) and advisement, and work-based learning opportunities (e.g., apprenticeships, internships). The program is undergirded by the belief that "students need to see these careers in the actual industry setting so they can realize what this is and realize the people who are doing these [jobs] so that it becomes a reality" to youth and families.

Flexible Programming to Support Multiple Pathways

As part of their partnership, Southeast Tech and SFSD-CTE Academy have sought to leverage the available resources and programming within both institutions and create novel program elements where demand exists. Students are able to engage in one or more program elements that are integrated to support their progress along pathways. The supports are aligned to each young person's unique interests, strengths, and needs.

Apart from the 200 students participating in their growing internship program, Southeast Tech and SFSD-CTE Academy are in the process of developing apprenticeship programs across industries from healthcare and dentistry to plumbing, construction, and welding in which students gain work experience, coursework, and "actually receive pay for the time in class...for the time that they're actually working on site...[and] get the benefit of learning the material but also not only learn in the classroom but learning hands on and getting paid for it." Furthermore, Southeast Tech is continuing to develop an innovative dual-credit program that allows students to take post-secondary coursework at Southeast Tech at a reduced rate, engage with students and faculty in a post-secondary setting, and develop relationships with Success Advisors to help them navigate the post-secondary transition.

Southeast Tech and SFSD-CTE Academy are also leveraging existing opportunities within the district to offer certification in fields such as certified nursing assistant, building deeper relationships with community-based certification programs in trades, healthcare, and technology, and developing state-accredited certification programs of their own in professions and fields where programming in the community is nonexistent.

In addition, Southeast Tech and SFSD-CTE Academy have found creative ways to facilitate partnerships between the education and business communities to develop scholarship and funding opportunities for students. Four programs that are a result of the Southeast Tech and SFSD-CTE Academy partnership include:

- The Bring Your 'A' Game national program has been adapted for participating youth to learn soft skills related to career development and management. Students gain valuable knowledge about the importance of punctuality, social and emotional competencies, and professional development. This program serves as a complement to student internship experiences. Furthermore, students can gain certification in these professional skills to demonstrate their competencies related to professional and career development.

- The Build Dakota program provides students with scholarship funding, often sponsored by corporate or industry partners. In exchange young people commit to working at their sponsoring entities for a predetermined amount of time after completing their training. Feedback from industry partners has been positive as many "want to get involved in sponsor-a-scholar so we can support them while they're in school and then when they get out, then we already have this person we know, we like them, and then we'll have them an employee. So, we're building that to actually [support] the low to moderate income [students], so they actually have additional resources in order to complete their degree."

- The South Dakota PaSS program, a partnership between high schools, Southeast Tech and Dakota State University, allows students to begin taking coursework toward certification during high school with the possibility of matriculating to Southeast Tech or Dakota State University to pursue two- or four-year degrees thereafter.

- The Aspire2Tech Program, a 15-week certification program that specializes in providing adult education for English as a Second Language students at Southeast Tech, integrates general and career education. The Center endeavors to build literacy, numeracy and Language skills by using materials specific to the student's career field of interest.

The common thread tying these multiple programming pathways together is a desire to deeply understand the community of youth, families, and education and workforce systems within the Sioux Falls area to reduce barriers to productive post-secondary and career pathways. According to a senior administrator at Southeast Tech, "Our population is becoming much more diverse. We're hearing industry saying these are such great employees. We just need to find a way to get them to have more skilled training so they can take on even more responsibility. There's no barrier that we're seeing as far as industry not embracing the community's diversity. They're more likely to say how do we get them up to a higher level." This responsiveness to youth voice and industry need has been the driving force behind the Southeast Tech and SFSD-CTE Academy partnership and their continued efforts to develop innovative programming for young people seeking productive and meaningful career pathways.

ENDNOTES

1. Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012; Lewis, & Burd-Sharps, 2018

2. Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2014

3. Hurst, Kelly, & Princiotta, 2004

4. Mac Iver & Wang, 2011

5. Barrat & Berliner, 2016

6. Reeves, 2014

7. Hammond, Smink, & Drew, 2007; Nield, 2009; Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Nield, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007

8. Rumberger, 2011

9. Center for Promise, 2014; Center for Promise, 2015

10. One of the more well-known frameworks used in school districts to understand the strengths that their students should have or should be learning.

11. A recent study, conducted by the company Knack, used gaming technology to assess the aptitudes of 600 youth (not in school and not employed) to work in a variety of vocations, ranging from restaurant service to financial analyst. The authors found that the distribution of the aptitudes—e.g., planning, resilience, teamwork—were little different than the distribution for the general population. The results counter the myth that opportunity youth are without jobs because they inherently lack competencies that matter for the workforce.

12. Varga & Zaff, 2017

13. Zaff, Donlan, Jones, & Lin, 2015

14. Zaff, Pufall Jones, Donlan & Anderson, 2016

15. Recent mentoring studies have moved toward using a developmental systems perspective, recognizing how parents, adults throughout a young person's community, mentors, and youth in mentoring relationships are interconnected (Keller, 2005; Keller & Blakeslee, 2014; Spencer, Bausaldo-Delmonico, & Lewis, 2011). These studies have begun to show how the dyad of a youth and mentor influences and is influenced by the relationships around the dyad.

16. Varga & Zaff, 2018; Putnam, 2000

17. Adler & Kwon, 2002

18. Varga & Zaff, 2018

19. Zaff, Pufall Jones, Donlan & Anderson, 2016

20. Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, Buck, & Dewar, 2011

21. Jackson et al., 2007

22. Flanagan, Varga, Zaff, Margolius, & Lin, 2018

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About the Center for Promise

The Center for Promise is the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance, housed at Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development and dedicated to understanding what young people need to thrive and how to create the conditions of success for all young people.

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About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the nation's largest network dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth. We bring together more than 400 national organizations and thousands of community leaders to focus the nation's attention on young people's lives and voices, lead bold campaigns to expand opportunity, conduct groundbreaking research on what young people need to thrive, and accelerate the adoption of strategies that help young people succeed. GradNation, our signature campaign, mobilizes Americans to increase the nation's high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020. In the past 12 years, an additional 2 million young people have graduated from high school.

About the Citi Foundation

Citi Foundation

The Citi Foundation works to promote economic progress and improve the lives of people in low-income communities around the world. We invest in efforts that increase financial inclusion, catalyze job opportunities for youth, and reimagine approaches to building economically vibrant cities. The Citi Foundation's "More than Philanthropy" approach leverages the enormous expertise of Citi and its people to fulfill our mission and drive thought leadership and innovation. For more information, visit citifoundation.com.