

BUILDING A CROSS-SYSTEMS COLLABORATIVE TO RE-ENGAGE DISCONNECTED YOUTH

A Working Paper Developed by the Youth Development Task Force of the Mayor's Commission on Children, Youth and Families



INTRODUCTION

A St. Louis City youth had been on official court supervision for ten months when he was referred again to the juvenile court for a tampering charge and a robbery charge. He was small-framed and would not take the medication that had been prescribed by his psychiatrist. The youth plead to some delinquency charges and Judge Jimmie Edwards ordered him to Missouri Division of Youth Services to get the help he needed. Judge Edwards always talks to the youth once he completes the disposition. When the Judge addresses youth, he tells them what he expects them to do from that point forward. On that day, Judge Edwards said, "I want you to go to DYS, work the program, take your medication and get an education." When Judge Edwards finished talking to the boy he asked him if he had any questions and the boy replied, "Yes, can I give you a hug?" Prior to this interaction, no one had cared for this youth and upheld positive expectations.

Think back to when you were 13 years old. Beyond your family, who was there to help you with school and life? For too many youth in the City of St. Louis the answer is "no one."

In early 2007, members of the Mayor's Commission on Children, Youth and Families identified youth disengagement as a critical problem in the City of St. Louis. While numbers were hard to come by, the group realized that thousands of young people in St. Louis were literally disconnected – from school, from work, from community because they have dropped out of school. Building on the Commission's

success in addressing early childhood education and after-school program shortages, the Youth Development Task Force was formed. It is comprised of representatives from various sectors of the community: community-based organizations, government, philanthropy, education, law enforcement and courts.

Eight work groups were convened around issues related to dropout re-engagement. The work groups involved a broad cross-section of St. Louis area educational, social service and civic leaders. The work groups met from November 2007 through January 2008 to develop the initial recommendations for creating a cross-systems approach to ensuring that all St. Louis youth are graduating from high school by 2012.

The work groups and the co-chairs are:

Beyond High School, co-chaired by Stacy Clay and Quentin Wilson
Connecting Services, co-chaired by Tom Jones and Russ Signorino
Creating a Youth-Focused Community, chaired by Bridget Flood
Data and Information Systems, chaired by Rich Patton
Multiple Pathways, co-chaired by Joli Baker and Alice Roach
Training & Professional Development, chaired by Jama Dodson
Youth Engagement, co-chaired by Jim Braun and Flint Fowler
Building a Cross-System Collaborative, co-chaired by David Thomas and Theresa Mayberry

We are grateful to the co-chairs and the work group participants for the incredible energy they have already contributed to this effort. Through the Mayor's Summit on High School Dropouts, we sought input on how we can best support our city's youth so they are prepared for success in school, work and life.

It is important to note that the input of youth is a critical component of this process. Through focus groups and a Youth Summit held on January 19, youth provided their thoughts on school, why students drop out and what can be done to assist all students in earning a high school diploma. This is viewed as the first in many efforts to actively engage youth in dialogue and community action.

OUR VISION

All youth in the City of St. Louis will graduate from high school.

OUR GOAL

Eliminate dropouts in the City of St. Louis by 2012 through the development of a cross-systems collaborative that re-engages youth who have dropped out of school and prevents others from dropping out in the first place.

OUR CORE BELIEFS

St. Louis will only achieve its full potential if all children and youth succeed. The involvement, investment and collaboration of all sectors in the community are essential to providing young people with the supports and structures necessary to succeed.

It is the responsibility of the entire community to assure that every child is ready for college, work and life by age 21.

DEFINITION OF YOUTH

The Disconnected Youth Project is focused on strategies for re-engaging youth ages 11 to 24 (with the core group 16 to 21) who are already disconnected from a learning environment or are at risk of dropping out. For the purposes of this project, “disconnected youth” include those who are out-of-school, out-of-work, released from juvenile justice, under court supervision, runaway/homeless, pregnant or parenting and/or in foster care.

THE ISSUE

Every nine seconds in America a student becomes a dropout.¹

Dropping out of high school is related to a number of negative outcomes. For example, the average income of persons ages 18 through 65 who had not completed high school was roughly \$20,100 in 2005.² By comparison, the average income of persons ages 18 through 65 who completed their education with a high school credential, including a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, was nearly \$29,700³.

Dropouts are less likely to be in the labor force than those with a high school credential. If they are in the labor force, they are more likely to be unemployed⁴. In terms of health, dropouts over age 24 tend to report being in worse health than adults who are not dropouts, regardless of income⁵. Dropouts also make up disproportionately higher percentages of the nation’s prison and death row inmates.⁶

Most dropouts are motivated and persistent about completing their high school education. Close to 60% eventually earn a high school credential – usually a GED. Almost half of the dropouts who attain a secondary credential later enroll in a two-year or four-year college. However, only about 10% eventually earn a degree.⁷

Who drops out

An analysis of the National Educational Longitudinal Study, which tracked the educational progress of approximately 25,000 eighth-graders in 1988 over 12 years to 2000, found that about 20% of all students

¹ Martin, N. and Halperin, S., Whatever It Takes: How 12 Communities are Reconnecting Out-of-school Youth. American Youth Policy Forum.: March, 2006. Available at

<http://www.aypf.org/publications/WhateverItTakes/WITfull.pdf>

² National Center for Education Statistics, Dropout Rates in the United States 2005,

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/dropout05/index.asp> These are not all high school dropouts: 0.6 percent of persons ages 18 through 65 were enrolled in high school in 2005 ([U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey CPS, October 2005](#)).

³ U.S. Census Bureau, 2006.

⁴ U.S. Department of Labor, 2006

⁵ U.S. Department of Education, 2004.

⁶ National Center for Education Statistics, Dropout Rates in the United States 2005,

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/dropout05/index.asp> Estimates from the most recent data available indicate that approximately 30 percent of federal inmates, 40 percent of state prison inmates, and 50 percent of persons on death row are high school dropouts (data from 1997 and 1998; U.S. Department of Justice 2000, 2002). Although not strictly comparable, estimates for the general population during the same years indicate that about 18 percent were dropouts ([U.S. Census Bureau 1998a, 1988b](#)).

⁷ Making Good on a Promise: What Policymakers Can Do to Support the Educational Persistence of Dropouts, <http://www.cycinfo.org/docs/Making%20Good%20on%20the%20Promise%20Report.pdf>

nationwide drop out of school.⁸ Typically, students who drop out or are at risk of dropping out are over-age and under-credited in school.

Socioeconomic status – based on the income and education of the parents – is the single best predictor of dropping out. Because Blacks and Hispanics are over-represented in low socioeconomic communities, dropouts disproportionately affect these communities.

There have been numerous studies attempting to define the characteristics of students with risk factors associated with dropping out of school. However, this approach has yielded only about a 30 percent predictability rate.⁹

Researchers have also identified a causal relationship between students with disabilities, dropping out of high school and incarceration. Youth in custody are three to five times more likely to have a learning disability and more than two-thirds will not return to school after release.¹⁰

Why students drop out

There is no single reason why students drop out of high school. Reasons cited include: a lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and personal reasons – including the need to earn money, becoming a parent, and responsibility for caring for family members. For most dropouts, the process is a gradual one demonstrated by decreasing engagement and attendance.¹¹ School-related indicators are considered better predictors than social indicators.

School-related indicators for potential dropouts:

- Receive poor grades in core subjects,
- Possess low attendance rates,
- Fail to be promoted to the next grade, and
- Are disengaged in the classroom.

Social indicators for potential dropouts:

- Documented abuse and neglect,
- Behavior problems, and
- High mobility

Disengaged youth in St. Louis

There are approximately 45,000 youth between the ages of 16 and 24 in the City of St. Louis.¹¹ There are few available numbers identifying the number of youth who have dropped out of school; current estimates range between 1,600 and 4,500.

There are some data available of “disengaged youth” who meet our definition of out-of-school, out-of-work, released from juvenile justice, under court supervision, homeless/runaway, pregnant or parenting and/or in foster care.

In the 2006-2007 school year, 1,667 high school students (17% of 9th to 12th graders) dropped out of the St. Louis Public Schools.¹² As a public school district, the St. Louis Public Schools are required to report the number of dropouts but this does not account for all of the youth who are disconnected from other St. Louis educational institutions, including parochial and private schools.

⁸ Almeida, C., Johnson, C. and Steinberg, A., Making Good on a Promise: What Policymakers Can Do to Support the Educational Persistence of Dropouts.: April 2006. Available at <http://www.cycinfo.org/docs/Making%20Good%20on%20the%20Promise%20Report.pdf>

⁹ Kennelly, L. and Monrad, M., Approaches to Dropout Prevention: Heeding Early Warning Signs With Appropriate Interventions. National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research.: October, 2007. Available at http://www.betterhighschools.com/docs/NHSC_ApproachesToDropoutPrevention.pdf.

¹⁰ Arthur, P., Issues Faced by Juveniles Leaving Custody: Breaking Down the Barriers. National Center for Youth Law: University of Oregon.: April, 2007. Available at http://www.youthlaw.org/fileadmin/ncyl/youthlaw/events_trainings/Issues_Faced_by_Juveniles_Leaving_Custody.ppt#278,5, Typical Characteristics

¹¹ 2006 Missouri Census Data Center & 2000 US Census

¹² Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

In 2007, 1,073 youth were released from juvenile detention and approximately 300 to 350 children are under official court supervision at any one time.¹³ In the City of St. Louis, four to six youth age out of foster care each month.¹⁴

“Alexis”

Alexis went into foster care more than four years ago at age 12 as a result of physical and emotional abuse. Her mother died when she was young. Alexis was being raised by her father who was extremely violent. During her four years in foster care it was discovered that she was also sexually abused. She has dealt with psychiatric problems, the trauma of violence and abuse and over 15 different foster care placements – most requiring her to change schools.

Alexis’ Voices for Children attorney has represented her from the day she entered the foster care system and has been a constant in her life. While nine different case managers have come and gone, her Voices attorney continues to be the only person who knows Alexis’ entire physical and mental health history, as well as her social service needs. In fact, she is one of the few people who really knows Alexis – her achievements and ongoing challenges; her hopes and dreams.

Today, Alexis is making choices that don’t allow past tragedies to define her future. She has enrolled in GED classes, is learning independent living skills and just started her first job.

PROMISING PRACTICES IN CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Communities across the country are looking at cross-sector strategies to address the national dropout crisis. The Alternative Pathways Project, the Ready by 21 Initiative of the Forum for Youth Investment and the Multiple Pathways to Graduation Initiative of the Youth Transition Funders Network are national, multi-city efforts to share information and experience that can be adapted locally. St. Louis is one of six cities receiving technical assistance from the National League of Cities to develop collaborations for re-engaging disconnected youth.

In developing this “working paper”, the work groups studied models that have been put into place in such cities as New York City, Philadelphia, and Portland, OR which provide possibilities for replication as well as for critical lessons learned.

- ❖ New York City developed an Office of Multiple Pathways within its Department of Education to focus on over-age, under-credited youth. Four types of programs were developed to specifically target and engage over-age, under-credited youth, including Transfer Schools, Youth Adult Borough Centers, Blended GED Programs and Learning to Work Program. Several alternative schools have been developed, such as Community Prep High School for youth released from the juvenile justice system. New York is also home to The Door, a community organization that provides a full range of integrated services at a single site, free of charge to any adolescent between the ages 12 and 21.
- ❖ Oregon passed a law that residents have a right to a publicly funded education until they receive a high school diploma or reach age 21 by the start of a school year. Portland subsequently developed a range of programs for at-risk youth, including the national model for high school-community college

¹³ St. Louis Twenty-second Judicial Circuit Court.

¹⁴ City of St. Louis, Children’s Division

partnerships. Gateway to College allows students to complete high school while simultaneously earning college credits.

- ❖ Philadelphia’s initiative began under the leadership of the city’s mayor and School District of Philadelphia’s CEO. Philadelphia Public Schools have incorporated re-engagement and re-enrollment strategies into its high school reform agenda, and is working to open a center for youth wanting to return to school. The City’s Youth Council was instrumental in bringing stakeholders together. Two intermediary organizations, Safe and Sound Philadelphia and Philadelphia Youth Network play critical roles in terms of tracking data outcomes and overseeing programming for out-of-school youth. Project U-Turn was developed to bring attention to the dropout crisis in Philadelphia and has had significant results to date.

Elements critical to re-engaging disconnected youth in education:

- Open-entry/Open-exit: students move at their own pace and graduation occurs when the student has successfully completed all requirements
- Flexible scheduling and year-round learning
- Teachers who serve as coaches and facilitators and allow youth to develop relationships with them
- Real world, career-oriented curricula
- Opportunities for employment
- Clear codes of conduct with consistent enforcement
- Extensive support services
- Portfolio of options for a varied group—one size does not fit all

EMERGING RECOMMENDATIONS

Create non-traditional learning environments for non-traditional students

Strategic Recommendations:

- ❖ **Build on and Support Promising Local Educational Models**, such as Clyde C. Miller Career Academy, In It 2 Win, ACE Program, CAN! Academy, and Big Picture Schools.
- ❖ **Assess and Support Development of New Diploma, GED, Employment and Career Development Programs** that have a proven track record in other communities.

Partner schools and community to improve traditional school environments

Strategic Recommendations:

- ❖ **Create Safe and Welcoming School Environments** through violence and gang prevention programs, community policing initiatives.
- ❖ **Link Parents to Schools as Full Partners**, teach child-rearing skills and encourage adults to complete their education along with their children.
- ❖ **Facilitate Placement of Licensed Therapists in All Schools.**
 - Employ a licensed therapist in every school to help appropriately intervene and properly assist youth with critical challenges that teachers are not trained to address.
 - Ensure youth with special needs have access to services.
- ❖ **Connect High School to the “Real World”.**
 - Build on and expand models like Early College which enables students to earn a diploma through high school classes in the morning and work toward a degree through community college courses in the afternoon.
 - Link “peers and careers” through programs like the Career and College Clubs at Gateway Middle which provide regular group sessions facilitated by community groups. Explore expansion to high schools and disconnected youth service centers.
 - Involve four-year colleges in an innovative pilot to prevent dropouts by showing middle and high school students the benefits of a college degree.
 - Increase the number and quality of internships for high school youth with an emphasis on career mentoring.

- Integrate applied learning and the connection between academics and job skills/careers into educational programs.

Make it easy for disconnected youth to get the services they need now

Strategic Recommendations:

- ❖ **Develop One-Stop-Shop Centers** like The Door in New York City (www.Door.org)
 - Drop-in centers designed by youth for youth as fun places to be
 - Full range of support services, e.g. health clinic, counseling, ESL and GED services
- ❖ **Connect Youth with a Caring Adult:**
 - Develop a Volunteer-Based Youth Advocate System similar to Voices for Children in the juvenile justice system. Engage adults in the community with youth to identify services, assist in case management, and advocate for youth needs. Program would be community-based for re-engaging dropouts and school-based to work with students at risk of dropping out. In order to attain the most effective advocate/youth relationship, there must be consistency in the assignment of advocates to youth. Therefore, the program would run year-round and the youth would remain with the same advocate throughout the process.
- ❖ **Make it Easy for Dropouts to Find What They Need:**
 - Develop a comprehensive online and print directory of local programs targeted to the dropout population. Update annually. Make available throughout the City of St. Louis and on the internet. Engage schools, churches and community organizations in distribution.
- ❖ **Centralize Access to Services:**
 - Build off of Missouri's 2-1-1 24/7 call center as an easy-to-access central repository for information about social service and education/employment programs targeted to the dropout population.
 - Evaluate existing programs for ability to meet youth needs in education and employment; fill gaps as identified.
 - Improve marketing of 2-1-1 to ensure youth and the adults who live and work with them know that help is just a phone call away.
- ❖ **Connect Parents with Information Resources by linking ParentLink, 454-TEEN and Missouri PIRC to Missouri 2-1-1 and publicize** these resources so parents can access services and assistance for children who are at-risk of dropping out of school or who have already dropped out.

Implement policies that improve the success opportunities for young adults

Strategic Recommendations:

- ❖ Amend board policy and administrative practices to **allow students between 16 and 17 years of age to attend alternative education/GED programs** outside the traditional school system.
- ❖ **Address child care assistance regulations to allow pregnant/parenting teens to apply for child care assistance while pregnant** rather than waiting until after they have given birth.
- ❖ Develop legislation that gives school districts the responsibility and resources to **develop in-district alternatives** for youth who require learning in a nontraditional environment, and for districts to notify youth of all alternative educational options when they are highly at-risk of dropping out.

Give youth a voice

Strategic Recommendations:

- ❖ **Institute a Youth Advisory Council to the Mayor.** Build upon previous Youth Advisory Council's (Office of Youth Development) strengths and lessons learned.

- ❖ **Create a long-term, sustainable youth engagement initiative in partnership with current youth-focused organizations** to provide young people with the opportunity to participate in broad-based community problem-solving.
- ❖ **Utilize input and data gained through youth engagement efforts to inform the overall strategic planning process to re-engage disconnected youth** (e.g., 1/19 Youth Summit). This youth input should also inform the Mayor's Youth Advisory Council and the youth engagement initiative recommended above.

Let youth know we care

Strategic Recommendations:

- ❖ **Elevate the Profile of Disengaged Youth** by creating a Youth Commissioner in the City of St. Louis.
- ❖ **Create a Citywide Campaign to Assist Dropouts.** Emulate the Project U-Turn campaign in Philadelphia to bring attention to the city's dropout crisis through the 5 "C"s: consider, count, collaborate, connect and change.
- ❖ **Conduct Strategic Tracking and Outreach for Youth Who Do Not Make the Transition from 8th to 9th Grade** through a partnership between the Family Court Truancy Unit and the St. Louis Public School District. This is considered a critical juncture for teenagers.

Build the core competencies of youth workers to effectively serve older teens

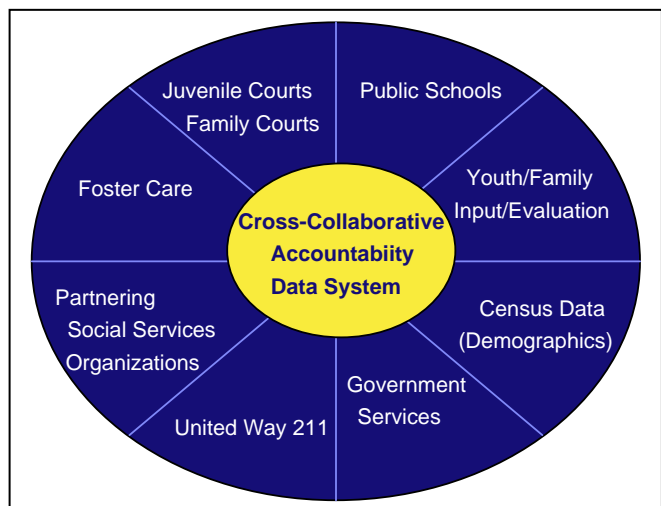
Strategic Recommendations:

- ❖ **Broaden the Definition of Youth Workers** to include people in a wide-range of professions including education, juvenile justice, social services, medicine and law
- ❖ **Develop Common Professional Competencies** for all youth workers and build professional development training around them.
- ❖ **Ensure Existing Program Standards are Consistently Used.**
- ❖ **Develop a Youth Worker Certificate** as a sought-after credential.

Create a cross-collaborative accountability data system

Strategic Recommendations:

- ❖ **Establish Common Core Data** to clearly identify the full scope of the population in need of services, including demographic and risk factors.
 - **Convene key stakeholders to develop one consistent definition of dropouts** and of over-age, under-credited youth and develop consistent data collection and tracking methods community-wide.
 - **Establish Clear Performance/Outcome Measurements** for organizations participating in the cross-systems collaborative. Connect to the Ready by 21 framework used in other communities.
 - **Establish an Early Warning System** for schools, court system and social service agencies.
 - **Establish Data on Youth Workers** to ensure St. Louis has full complement of



youth development professionals.

- For example, investigate the role of gender in serving disconnected youth.

Reach beyond the City of St. Louis to create regional partnerships

Strategic Recommendation:

- ❖ **Support Creation of a Regional Partnership for Educational Achievement** as an umbrella for strategy and funding of a myriad of educational issues including prevention and re-engagement of dropouts. This is a regional challenge that requires a regional approach.

The full recommendations are attached.

NEXT STEPS

This “working paper” and its recommendations were possible due to the commitment and thoughtful discussions of many individuals. The document will be updated as new information becomes available and it will be accessible at: <http://stlc.in.missouri.org/education/youthDevelopment.cfm>.

Cross-Systems Opportunities

The NLC’s Institute for Youth, Education and Families defines a cross-system collaboration for disconnected youth as two or more public agencies committing and following through on “exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources and enhancing each other’s capacity for common or overlapping groups of young adults.” According to the NLC, the benefits of cross-system collaboration include:

- ❖ Improved experiences of young people dealing with disconnection
- ❖ Changes to the way individual systems operate and how existing agencies do their work
- ❖ Filled gaps in services and more comprehensive and effective interventions
- ❖ More effective uses of scarce public resources
- ❖ Better structures and practices for sharing valuable information

The Building a Cross-Systems Collaborative Work Group met in March to review the working paper and recommendations, as well as to combine and prioritize cross-systems opportunities identified from the recommendations:

- ❖ Expanding use of 2-1-1
- ❖ Designing and implementing a series of “one-stop shops”
- ❖ Developing a sustainable system for youth engagement in community problem-solving

Projects in the above areas will be identified and implemented as resources allow. If you would like to get involved with the Re-engaging Disconnected Youth Project, send an email to ydtf08@gmail.com. With community support and participation, we will continue to work to ensure that every youth is a high school graduate.