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YouthBuild New Jersey: Designing Multiple Pathways to Success

The Roper Group
Richard W. Roper, President

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47 Bleeker Street - Newark, New Jersey- 07102

Introduction

One of several major challenges confronting secondary education systems across the nation is how to induce high school dropouts to reengage with an educational program. Without a high school diploma or the General Education Diploma (GED), dropouts are likely to experience extreme difficulty obtaining gainful employment. Indeed, theirs is likely to be a life of constant economic disappointment, with the almost certain prospect of social alienation.

YouthBuild is a program that serves high school dropouts, ages 16 to 24, by helping them work toward attaining a GED or high school diploma while learning construction trade skills. The program emphasizes leadership development, community service, and the creation of a positive mini-community of adults and youth committed to each other's success. Students may earn AmeriCorps education awards through the application of their construction skills and other community service. At exit, their options include college attendance, productive employment, or both.

A 2010 demographic profile of 4,252 YouthBuild participants nationally revealed that 71 percent were male and 29 percent were female. African-Americans accounted for 54 percent of the total, while 22 percent were white, 20 percent were Latino, 4 percent Native-American and 3 percent Asian-American. The data also described a population with social and educational challenges that traditional public schools have shown an inability to address. Thirty-two percent of the population had been adjudicated, 11 percent had been convicted of a felony, 45 percent were welfare recipients, 19 percent lived in public housing, 31 percent were parents, 94 percent lacked a high school diploma or GED and the average reading (grade) level was 7.4.

Today, there are 273 YouthBuild programs in 46 states, Washington, DC, and the Virgin Islands engaging approximately 10,000 young adults per year.¹

Because a comprehensive approach is called for, the YouthBuild program has gradually and inevitably become a number of things at once:

Alternative school, in which young people attend a YouthBuild school full-time during alternate weeks, studying for their GEDs or high school diplomas. Classes are small, allowing one-on-one attention to students.

¹ YouthBuild USA Organizational Web site, <http://www.youthbuild.org/> (accessed July 1, 2012).

Job training and pre-apprenticeship program, in which young people get close supervision and training in construction skills full-time on alternate weeks from qualified instructors.

Community service program, in which young people build housing for homeless and other low-income people, providing a valuable and visible commodity for their hard-pressed communities.

Leadership development and civic engagement program, in which young people share in the governance of their own program through an elected policy committee and participate actively in community affairs, learning the values and the lifelong commitment needed to be effective and ethical community leaders.

Youth development program, in which young people participate in personal counseling, peer support groups, and life planning processes that assist them in healing from past hurts, overcoming negative habits and attitudes, and achieving goals that will establish a productive life.

Long-term mini-community, in which young people make new friends committed to a positive lifestyle, pursue cultural and recreational activities together, and can continue to participate for years through the YouthBuild alumni association.

Community development program, in which community-based organizations obtain the resources to tackle several key community issues at once, strengthening their capacity to build and manage housing for their residents, educate and inspire their youth, create leadership for the future, and generally take responsibility for their neighborhoods.²

YouthBuild New Jersey

In New Jersey, there are nine YouthBuild programs; they operate in Newark, Jersey City, Elizabeth, Paterson, Trenton, Camden, Atlantic City, Vineland, and Passaic. In each of these communities except Camden, the program is sponsored by a community development corporation (CDC) or some other nonprofit, nongovernmental organization. The Camden program is sponsored by the city's housing authority. This paper focuses on the work of seven of these programs—those funded by the Office of the New Jersey Attorney General (OAG). These programs operate in Newark, Trenton, Elizabeth, Camden, Vineland, Atlantic City, and Paterson.

The demographic profile of participants in the New Jersey programs conforms to that of the programs across the nation. New Jersey's programs also adhere strictly to the operating

² Ibid.

principles on which YouthBuild is based. This paper explores one dimension of the work the OAG-supported programs have undertaken, that of responding to the challenge of designing and implementing viable alternative education strategies or multiple pathways to success targeted at high school dropouts. Data outlined in this report suggest that dropouts enrolled in the YouthBuild program are responding in a positive way to its approach.

Interviews with several YouthBuild education program leaders and a recently completed assessment of the OAG-funded YouthBuild programs authored by Michael Simmons provide the descriptive information about these programs.³

YouthBuild Newark: Annually, around 60 students are served by YouthBuild Newark. Since its founding in 2003, 83 percent of students have achieved gains in literacy and/or numeracy, 80 percent received their GED, and 83 percent have obtained gainful employment and/or enrolled in postsecondary education or training. A testament to YouthBuild Newark's youth development programming is that less than 5 percent of students have recidivated during their program enrollment period. YouthBuild Newark's community revitalization initiatives have been equally impressive. Over a two-year period between 2007 and 2009, YouthBuild Newark has assisted in the construction and/or rehabilitation of 14 units of affordable housing for low-income residents and families. Moreover, through its Independent Living Program, YouthBuild Newark provides transitional housing assistance to nondomiciled students. Program leaders estimate the cost per annum, per pupil at \$20,000.

YouthBuild Atlantic City: Launched in 2010 under the auspices of the Atlantic City Boys and Girls Club, YouthBuild Atlantic City's (AC) first program cohort started on March 14, 2011. Since its inception, the YouthBuild AC students have improved the infrastructure of their surrounding community by renovating a senior citizen housing complex and assisting in the renovation of a community volunteer facility and the construction of a community computer lab. As a testament to YouthBuild AC outstanding programming and youth engagement activities, the program's average daily student attendance is 94 percent.

YouthBuild Camden: Founded in 2002, YouthBuild Camden has become an established alternative educational and youth development organization in the city of Camden. A division of the Camden Housing Authority, YouthBuild Camden assists disconnected adolescents aged 16 to 24 obtain their high school diploma or GED, obtain job

³ Michael Simmons, "New Jersey YouthBuild Assessment: A Preliminary Report for the New Jersey Office of the Attorney General YouthBuild Model Expansion and Innovation Pilot Project," Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies, Rutgers—The State University of New Jersey, August, 2012, 17--25.

skills, and secure post-program placement in higher education, the armed forces, or the labor force. The young people served by YouthBuild Camden face a number of educational- and employment-related barriers. Currently less than 60 percent of Camden's public high school students graduate,⁴ and the city's unemployment rates for young adults aged 16 to 24 is close to 80 percent.⁵

Paterson Great Falls YouthBuild: In 1999, Paterson Great Falls YouthBuild opened its doors to challenged youth who dropped out of high school as well as youth who wanted to make a change in the community. A program sponsored by New Jersey Community Development Corporation (NJCDC), Paterson Great Falls YouthBuild enrolls thirty to thirty-five youth per year using the YouthBuild model of providing skills training in the construction trades as the means of transforming the lives of area youth. Paterson Great Falls YouthBuild has become one of the premiere youth programs in Passaic County. The program focuses on five core areas as the means to success: academics, construction trades, job readiness, leadership development, and case management. Over the past thirteen years, Paterson Great Falls YouthBuild has served over 400 youth. It is estimated that per pupil costs range from \$15,000 to \$20,000 annually.

YouthBuild Elizabeth: Founded in 2010, YouthBuild Elizabeth (YBE) is a component of the Brand New Day community development corporation. YBE is an alternative school for at-promise young adults. It seeks to give young people a second chance to succeed by helping them obtain their GED, acquire skill training in the construction trades and become actively involved in their communities. YBE is funded by both YouthBuild Newark (YBN) and the OAG.

Isles YouthBuild: Isles YouthBuild Institute (IYI), the oldest YouthBuild program in the state, established in 1995, is located in Trenton. This program offers alternative high school education options for at-risk urban students seeking a high school diploma or GED, vocational skills training (construction, computer technology, office management), and life skills training (leadership, financial, health education, conflict management). Since it began operating, more than 700 students have matriculated in the program. Cost per pupil is estimated to be between \$10,000 and \$18,000 depending on the availability of grant funds.

ASPIRA YouthBuild: The ASPIRA YouthBuild program is based in Vineland and operates in partnership with the Cumberland County Technical Education Center (CCTEC). The program employs a twelve-month cycle of activities that provide at-promise young people with enrichment services in academic preparation, workforce readiness and

⁴ State of New Jersey Department of Education 2011 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates Web site: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/data/grate/> (accessed July 1, 2012)

⁵ United States Census Bureau American Community Survey Web site:

http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about_the_survey/american_community_survey_and_2010_census/

community service/leadership development activities. The twelve-month program is followed by an additional twelve-month post-program support system to help participants remain on a positive track as they make the transition to the next phase of their lives.

YouthBuild New Jersey: Alternative Education Strategies

Each of the New Jersey YouthBuild programs has developed its own unique educational organizational structure designed to reengage youth who have left the traditional public school setting. Camden YouthBuild, Isles YouthBuild, and YouthBuild Newark, for example, have each established bilateral agreements with the New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission (JJJ) to offer academic instruction leading to a New Jersey high school diploma in addition to the sites' existing GED academic preparation. These sites work closely with their local school district in providing the academic component of their education program. Students' placement in the high school diploma or GED track is contingent on several factors, including the number of high school credits previously earned and the student's current age. Students who have previously earned 80 credits or less (120 are needed for a New Jersey high school diploma) or are 21 years old and older are placed in the GED educational track.⁶

All seven OAG-funded programs offer the opportunity to obtain a GED, while three, as noted previously, offer opportunities to obtain either the GED or the high school diploma. This paper takes note of all seven approaches to the provision of educational support but gives particular attention to the programs in Newark, Camden, and Trenton (Isles) in which students can earn either a GED or high school diploma.⁷

Creating Multiple Pathways to Success

Educators who have spent their careers addressing educational challenges confronting “disconnected” or “alienated” youth—youth who have left or been pushed out of traditional education settings—maintain that what is referred to as “alternative education” should be viewed through the prism of “multiple pathways.” These educators argue that there should be a portfolio of options available to help such students achieve in the classroom and advance in life. They point out that program offerings must be reality-based and relevant to the student's life experiences and career aspirations, culturally sensitive, and, as much as possible, individualized. Additionally, they maintain that instruction should be offered in small learning community-type settings in order to enhance the likelihood that the

⁶ Simmons, “New Jersey YouthBuild Assessment,” 27.

⁷ The Great Falls YouthBuild Program is seeking to collaborate with the Paterson Public Schools in order to provide a high school diploma options for its students.

individualized needs of students can be met. The goal should be to meet students where they are, in terms of academic preparation, emotional status, cultural orientation, and social condition, and to move them forward, creating a pathway to success.⁸ YouthBuild's alternative education offerings are structured to meet these criteria and conditions.

The range of alternative education options is varied; they might be purely academic in nature, experiential, or vocationally oriented. Indeed, some educators would argue that combinations of these options are probably the most likely to achieve the best outcomes for students. As with any successful educational program, the quality of the offering must be maximized if the pathway is to be of any value. Alternative education strategies must embody high-quality instruction and be particularly sensitive to the often-stated criticism that such programs serve as dumping grounds for students unable to success in traditional education settings.⁹

YouthBuild New Jersey Pathways

The approaches being used by the New Jersey YouthBuild programs designed to provide disconnected youth with avenues to academic training and workplace skills are both traditional and novel. The more traditional aspect of the education and training offerings relate to typical classroom instruction in language arts, math, science, and social studies. The novel aspect involves experiential learning during which students learn while doing. This feature of the educational program is intended to respond to the need to provide students with immediately useful instruction relevant to the labor market and skills of immediate value to their community. All of the New Jersey programs, like YouthBuild programs nationally, employ skills training in the construction trades as the means by which experiential learning is imparted. Plumbing, masonry, landscaping, electrical technology, heating and cooling, welding, and carpentry are construction trade skills options taught in one or more of the programs. Students devote 50 percent of their time to academic instruction, 40 percent to construction trade skills development, and 10 percent to community service. The programs seek to realize dual goals through their approach to education and training—equipping students with academic preparation that will enable them to obtain a GED or a high school diploma and providing them with a vocational skill set that will enable them to secure employment in the construction trades and become productive members of their community.

Academic instruction and skills development, while necessary components of YouthBuild's program of educational uplift, are not sufficient to achieve the programs' overall goals of

⁸ Interviews with Newark Schools Superintendent Cami Anderson, YouthBuild USA Consultant Livinia Dickerson, and New Jersey Secretary of Higher Education Rochelle Hendricks.

⁹ Interview with Superintendent Anderson

self-sufficiency. These essential elements are encased in a program that features motivational stimulation, life skills development, and individualized support during and for a period after enrollment in the program.

- ***Motivation***

Overcoming the students' hostility to the local public education system is perhaps the biggest hurdle YouthBuild programs must address as students begin instruction, according to education program managers. Through constant reinforcement of students' self-worth, stressing that they can learn, are capable of being productive members of the community, and are valued as human beings, the programs seek to recalibrate the relationship between student and classroom by creating a learning community in which students' experiences are valued and the opportunity to engage their better selves is promoted. Students are encouraged to think of themselves as possessing both the ability and the opportunity to be all that they can be if they are focused and determined to succeed. In at least one program, students are told that education is the only path to freedom.

The range of motivational tools used to encourage students to think in positive ways about themselves and their life prospects include specialized motivational rituals, saying the YouthBuild pledge, promoting the YouthBuild philosophy, which stresses the belief that all students can succeed if they work hard and are focused on success. Counseling and mentoring are important, ongoing components of the program's motivational strategy.

- ***Life Skills***

The educational approach employed by YouthBuild also attempts to help students deal with the personal and social development challenges that the typical citizen navigates routinely on a daily basis. Students are instructed regarding work ethic, job readiness, resume writing, job application letter preparation, job interviewing, and thank you letter writing. They also are counseled in the areas of financial literacy and parenting. These instructional sessions are intended to help students gain confidence in performing tasks and engaging in activities with which many of them have no familiarity at all. In part this effort is focused on helping to remove the feeling of being defeated and replacing it with a sense of accomplishment.

- ***Support***

Personal and emotional support provided to students during the nine- to twelve-month training period is a critical component of the YouthBuild education approach. During the training period, YouthBuild staff seek to create an environment in which students feel safe and comfortable and in which they feel their life prospects can be positive. Staff work to assure students that support is available for participants who are committed to seeking

better life outcomes. Staff ask, how can we help you, how might we help you achieve your goals? Students, for example, are counseled about dealing with the challenges associated with obtaining child care, homelessness, substance abuse, and domestic violence.

This support continues for at least a year after students have completed their training and are engaged in putting to use what they have learned in the classroom and from hands-on construction trades training. Individual case management involving advice and counseling is provided to students who feel the need for this as they try to navigate the world of work or pursue additional education, either vocational or academic.

One of the key features of YouthBuild that some observers maintain helps explain its ability to engage disconnected students is its ability to successfully pair classroom instruction in language arts, math, science, and social studies—academic preparation—with training in the construction trades—experiential learning. Academic preparation is intended to result in students obtaining the GED or a high school diploma. Experiential preparation is intended to lead to students obtaining one or more certificates indicating entry-level proficiency in the construction trades.

- ***High School Diploma or GED***

A student enrolled in YouthBuild who has acquired at least 80 high school credits and is twenty years old or younger is eligible to continue to work toward obtaining a high school diploma. Students need 120 credits to receive the high school diploma. Instruction leading to the diploma is provided in all instances by individuals certified to teach in New Jersey classrooms. These instructors are in some cases employees of the local school district and are provided to YouthBuild through agreements between the district and YouthBuild. The curriculum used in preparing students to move toward the diploma is, in some instances, provided by the district. In other instances the instructors may or may not be local schoolteachers but are direct hires of and employees of YouthBuild. Two YouthBuild sites have agreements with their local school district. Additionally, three sites have established bilateral agreements with the New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission (JJC) to offer academic instruction leading to a New Jersey high school diploma in addition to the sites' GED academic preparation.

A student who has achieved less than 80 high school credits prior to enrolling in YouthBuild and is twenty-one years of age or older can work toward earning the GED but not the high school diploma. Instructors in this education track need not be certified teachers.

- ***Construction Trades Training***

The YouthBuild-sanctioned Pre-Apprentice Certificate Training (PACT) Curriculum, designed by the Home Builder's Institute (HBI), is used to guide students toward certifications in various construction fields.¹⁰ Additionally, certifications through the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) are also provided to YouthBuild students.

Skills training involve both classroom instruction and actual hands-on learning through supervised on-site application of classroom learning. YouthBuild students learn by doing; they assist in the renovation and rehabilitation of community-use buildings and the construction of low- and moderate-income housing.

One YouthBuild site also provides training and certification in communication technology.

Constraints and Challenges Confronting the YouthBuild New Jersey Education Model

While the availability of necessary financial resources is identified as a major constraint in the growth and development of YouthBuild's educational programs, other challenges loom large as well. The programs that do not offer the high school diploma option maintain that many of their eligible students wish to pursue the diploma but organizational infrastructure weaknesses and the lack of a working relationship with the local school district are major impediments to their efforts. Although only one site identified infrastructure limitation as an important constraining factor, all sites, whether they offer the diploma or not, argue that the ability to form a partnership with the local school district is dispositive. Without that relationship, they maintain, it is very difficult to marshal the resources, both human and financial, required to provide the high school diploma option.

Infrastructure limitations are described as being the lack of staff, organizational experience, and financial resources needed to organize, launch, and successfully manage a high school diploma option. One manager of a site's education program observed that the local school district viewed the YouthBuild educational program as competition for students and the dollars they represent. In view of that perception, building a working relationship seems unlikely, yet the guidance counselor in one of the local schools has referred alienated students to YouthBuild.

Those programs that have established a partnership with the JJC and are thereby offering the high school option argue that they appreciate the support provided by the OAG but the

¹⁰ Simmons, "New Jersey YouthBuild Assessment," 24.

constraints imposed on their programs are daunting. Complying with myriad rules is very difficult and program operations are made complicated if not impossible to manage. Partners in the education of disconnected students, YouthBuild education managers maintain, must be flexible in their approach to providing assistance as hard-and-fast rules are counterproductive and will only frustrate program staff and the students being served.

Not surprisingly, programs regard reliance on annual funding cycles as a major headache for all YouthBuild activities but especially for their educational initiatives. Multiyear funding, however, has been available only from the U.S. Department of Labor, the source of financial support for just under half of the New Jersey sites. The availability of sustained resources over a two- to three-year period would provide for more continuity in education program operations.

YouthBuild leaders maintain that in addition to support they have received from the OAG, New Jersey YouthBuild programs must also secure the financial support of the departments of Community Affairs, Labor, and Education. These agencies too, however, must be willing to be flexible in the application of hard-and-fast rules and funding requirements.

Comparison with Other Alternative Education models

YouthBuild provides only one of several alternative education models focused on multiple pathways to success. Although they do not constitute an exhaustive list, the following three programs are a sample of models considered noteworthy.

Big Picture Learning:

Big Picture Learning seeks to foster changes in education, both in the United States and internationally, by developing and sustaining innovative, personalized schools that work in tandem with the real world. These schools operate on the belief that in order to sustain successful schools where authentic and relevant learning takes place, they must continually innovate techniques and test learning tools to make the schools better and more rigorous. Lastly, there is a belief that in order to create and influence schools of the future, they must use the lessons learned through practice and research to achieve added leverage to impact changes in public policy.

Program Structure:

Essential elements of school organization include:

- Small schools and small advisories
- A culture of communication among staff and students within the building
- Learning Through Internship/Interest (LTIs) in the community
- Weekly staff meetings for staff
- Written reflection shared among staff members
- The community as a resource to the school/the school as a resource to the community
- Service learning projects in the community
- Facilities that reflect the Big Picture Learning design

Services Offered:

School-College Partnership, Preparation and Professional Development, Parent/Family Engagement and Adult Support.

Staff: Students are taught by teachers as well as volunteer mentors. There is a 15:1 student to teacher ratio. Staff includes teachers, counselors, volunteers, social workers, graduation coaches, parents, and school administrators

Performance track record: Big Picture Learning has an overall graduation rate of 92 percent for all of its schools. Schools are located in Detroit; Los Angeles; San Diego; Oakland, California; and Providence, Rhode Island;

Job Corps:

Job Corps is a free education and training program that helps young people learn a career, earn a high school diploma or GED, and find and keep a good job. For eligible young people at least sixteen years of age who qualify as low-income, Job Corps provides the all-around skills needed to succeed in a career and in life. Job Corps employs a holistic career development training approach that integrates the teaching of academic, vocational, and employability skills and social competencies through a combination of classroom, practical, and reality-based learning experiences to prepare youth for stable, long-term, high-paying jobs.

The Job Corps design includes the following features:

- Standard eligibility criteria
- A defined set of core competencies in academic, vocational, and information technology, employability, and independent living skills that represent the fundamental skills students need to secure and maintain employment
- Standardized systems for financial reporting, data collection, student benefits, and accountability
- Nationally established performance outcomes, goals, and quality expectations

The Job Corps design is based on the principles of quality services and individualized instruction to meet the needs of each student. Training approaches and methods of implementation vary to allow tailoring of service components and delivery methods, use resources effectively, and meet individual student and employer needs.

Staff: The student to teacher ratio is 15:1. There are seventy center directors and project managers nationwide.

Job Corps is administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Job Corps, under the leadership of the national director, supported by the national office of Job Corps and a field network of six regional offices. Education, training, and support services are provided to students at 125 Job Corps center campuses located throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. Job Corps centers are operated for the U.S. Department of Labor by private companies through competitive contracting processes, and by other federal agencies through interagency agreements.

Following enrollment, job or further academic placement, follow-up, and transitional career development support services are provided for eligible students through organizations contracted by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Cost per student trained: In program year (PY) 2002, the cost per new student enrolled was \$21,619. In 2003, it was \$23,313; in 2004 it was \$23,262; in 2005 it was \$23,486; in 2006 it was \$22,946, and in 2008, the cost per new student enrolled was \$24,182. Job Corps is a residential program. Facilities, staff, and services must be available in a safe and secure environment twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Performance Record:

| Common Measures Performance Indicators | PY 07 Result | PY08 Result | PY09 Result | PY10 Result |
|---|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Entered Employment/Education | 73% | 66% | 66% | 73% |
| Attained HSD/GED or Career Technical Training Certificate | 53% | 55% | 61% | 64% |
| Achieved Literacy or Numeracy Gains | 53% | 58% | 64% | 65% |

Youth Corps:

Through a combination of classes for the GED test and community service, Youth Corps members acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to secure gainful employment, job training or post-secondary education. Personal and career counseling assist the students overcome barriers to success. Community service assignments are designed to develop employability skills, team work and commitment. Work sites are project-oriented and include urban renewal, renovation and construction, landscaping, park beautification, child and senior care, hospital service and clerical and administrative support for the project organizations.

When enrollees first enter the program, instructors assess their skills in various areas. Student candidates take the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) in reading and math. For successful completion they must test at or above the 8th grade level in reading. They must also meet Work Investment Act (WIA) eligibility standards. During Orientation month, an educational plan for GED test preparation is developed according to each individual's needs.

What they seek to accomplish: Youth Corps' mission is to empower disenfranchised youth and their families to take responsibility for themselves and their community through programs and services that promote positive social and civic values; to create opportunities for self-improvement through academic instruction, employability training, community service, and to implement intervention strategies to foster family stabilization and neighborhood preservation.

Services they offer:

Corps members receive:

- instruction in basic skills and preparation to obtain a GED or locally issued Adult High School Diploma;
- life skills and employability skills instruction;
- personal and career counseling to build self-esteem, clarify values, and develop leadership skills while they are developing their career portfolio;
- transition services and continuing support services as they transition to college, training, employment or other national and domestic service opportunities;
- community service opportunities which develop positive employability skills while addressing unmet community needs. Corps members receive a stipend while enrolled in Youth Corps.

Cost per student trained: 2010: \$285.74

Performance track record: In Program Year 2009, the most recent year for which data are available, the New Jersey Youth Corps served 1,127 participants at its 12 locations statewide. Of these program participants, 108 (9 percent) entered a two- or four-year college, 409 (36 percent) entered employment, and 336 (30 percent) earned their GED or High School Diploma.

Role of State and Local Agencies in Facilitating Multiple Pathways to Success

New Jersey's state and local agencies could play a more effective and dynamic role in the development and advancement of multiple pathways but for the most part have failed to do so. Agencies like the departments of Education and Labor, the Office of the Secretary of higher Education and the Juvenile Justice Commission in the Office of the Attorney General oversee programs and projects that could contribute to and benefit from supportive engagement with organizations involved in promoting multiple pathways to success for alienated and disconnected youth.

In interviews with YouthBuild education program managers and with state education officials it was said that state and local agencies involved in setting policies that impact the delivery of education services should give more attention to streamlining competing and, in some instances, conflicting rules and regulations affecting education service delivery. To achieve this outcome would require a greater degree of familiarity with and support for alternative education approaches on the part of the leaders of these agencies. Nontraditional education must be viewed as offering real opportunities to reach and fully

engage students who have turned from traditional education.

Once these agencies commit to advancing multiple pathways they will need to develop matrices for measuring performance (using both qualitative and quantitative measures) and assessing program costs and benefits.

State and Local Policy Impacting YouthBuild’s Multiple Pathways Approach

The challenges that make the task of providing high school dropouts with educational alternatives are many but none are insurmountable. A number of the constraints faced by the organizations involved in this work can be ameliorated through relatively minor adjustments to state and local policies and procedures that on examination could be considered common sense changes. Other constraints require more creative policy solutions because they will require concerted action by two or more governmental agencies to affect change. The policy constraints listed below were identified by state and local education officials and YouthBuild staff, interviewed for this paper, who support or provide alternative education services. These challenges are embedded in the policies and procedures employed by state education, juvenile justice and social welfare agencies and by local public school districts.

Policy Deficit: To a very large degree, the principal policy challenge with respect to independent alternative education programs for school dropouts is the absence of state and local policies addressing this issue. New Jersey has clear rules and regulations governing the provision of alternative education services available at the local level but these rules apply only to programs offered “within a state agency, public college...or (State Education) department-approved school”¹¹. Programs serving youth who have severed their relationship with the local school district operate, for the most part, without policy guidance from the state education department. However, if the alternative education program offers instruction leading to a high school diploma, there is a state policy mandating that the program’s academic instructors be state certified to teach. With that exception, the rules governing these programs are developed by the programs’ sponsors and, consequently, differ depending on the educational philosophy employed by the sponsor.

Leadership Vacuum: The absence of a comprehensive state policy governing alternative education programs that operate outside state-sponsored agencies speaks of a leadership vacuum that education officials acknowledge should be corrected. The state education

¹¹ New Jersey Administrative Code (N.J.A.C.) 6A:16-9.1b

department does not have oversight responsibility for such programs and gives little or no attention to their educational philosophy, who they serve, how well they perform, whether or not they interact with the local school district or who their sponsors are.

Most local school districts, as a consequence, pay little attention to them as well. In some instances local districts consider these programs as competitors for students and treat them accordingly. Cooperation and collaboration between the districts and the programs often is not possible or is halting at best when just the opposite would logically be assumed to be the case.

Access to Student Information: Local school districts are prohibited from opening the files of current or former students to anyone other than those authorized to access that information. Alternative education providers do not have authorization. YouthBuild education program operators argue, however, that they should be allowed to gain access to information about students' educational history, mental health or emotional challenges, living condition and the like in order to provide appropriate case management assistance to their program participants. Failure to obtain this kind of information as participants begin the educational program means the individual plan developed to assist the participant throughout the program is likely to be deficient and of less value than it could have been.

Agency Silos: There are instances in which governmental agencies can be helpful in facilitating the development and operation of multiple pathways to educational and employment success. Such instances occur when local school districts contract with alternative education programs to meet the needs of current or former district students the traditional education approaches could not. They occur when cooperative agreements are forged between local districts and alternative education programs that involve district teachers program's classroom academic instruction. They also occur when a state agency like the Juvenile Justice Commission offers support to alternative education programs that help address the educational and employment challenges of youth at risk of contact with the state's juvenile justice system.

All too often, however, agencies that fund education services for their clients, like the state Division of Youth and Family Services, the Department of Corrections, the Juvenile Justice Commission, and the state education department are unable to work across agency boundaries to coordinate education service delivery. Lack of communication and coordination between agencies is a major impediment to more effective service delivery and more effective use of scarce resources.

Additionally, those education services paid for by the various state agencies that ostensibly benefit the agencies' clients are seldom evaluated to determine how well their clients are

being served. No agency of state government has responsibility for assessing the quality of

the provided education services.

Involvement of Community-Based Organizations: Critics of state government's lack of involvement and leadership in advancing multiple pathways to education and employment success argue that much could be gained by engaging community-based organizations (CDCs) in this effort. Local community-based organization, critics maintain, should be viewed as natural alternatives to local school district schools as providers of educational services, if they had the resources required to do this. Critics suggest that the state education department should be encouraged to reach out to well managed CDCs and enlist their help in meeting a pressing educational need.

Financial Support Constraints: YouthBuild is a U.S. Labor Department initiative; it provides the bulk of funding that supports a national network of local programs. Labor Department funding is multi-year; programs receive 2-year grants and can reapply as long as federal funding is available. Well managed programs, consequently, can anticipate continuity of program operations as long as they continue to be well managed. The focus of this paper is on the several New Jersey YouthBuild programs supported financially by the Office of the New Jersey Attorney General (OAG), which began in 2009. These programs have been funded on an annual basis over the past three years. OAG funding, however, will end in 2013 and identifying alternative sources of support looms as a major challenge for these programs.

YouthBuild education managers maintain, however, that their programs should be able to draw upon local school district resources as do charter schools. They argue that like charter schools, which receive a share of district funds based on the number of local students they enroll, funds should be allocated to alternative education programs on the same basis. YouthBuild leaders indicate that they serve a number of young people who, were they not disconnected dropouts, would be matriculating as local district students and should be eligible to receive public school student aid. If this were so, they argue, alternative education programs, like YouthBuild, would have a much steadier base of support from which to seek additional operating support.

Conclusion

New Jersey's YouthBuild programs have provided valuable services to disconnected youth in the areas of academic training, skills development and community engagement. The

programs continue to play an important role in assuring the availability of pathways to educational and employment success for youth and young adults who otherwise would find these outcomes unlikely. The programs' educational instruction and experiential training have been and continue to be effective in attracting and engaging disconnected youth, primarily high school dropouts, who have given up on traditional educational approaches and are now moving toward self-sufficiency.

When compared with other successful alternative educational programs, the New Jersey YouthBuild model appears to be as effective, in terms of inputs, such as cost and services provided relative to outcomes, such as number of participants served and percentage successfully completing the program. The application of cost-benefit analysis to the operation of the New Jersey programs would likely reveal that they deliver a socially beneficial service at a relatively reasonable cost.

The programs face some daunting challenges in the period ahead. Chief among these challenges is the availability of resources needed to continue operating. The programs funded by the U.S. Department of Labor are better situated, in the short run, with respect to funding because federal support is provided on a multi-year basis and can be renewed every two years. But federal government cutbacks in all areas of funding are expected to begin happening sooner rather than later. The programs funded exclusively by the Office of the New Jersey Attorney General face the loss of funds next year, in 2013. Identifying alternative sources of support is a major priority with which all of the programs must contend.

The remaining challenges involve drawing the attention of state and local government officials to changes in policy that need to be made if alternative education programs like those operated by YouthBuild are to strengthen their ability to serve their target population. Issues that require attention are many, including the need for more leadership from the state education department in the area of alternative education options, enhanced cooperation between government agencies that serve youth and young adults, and greater flexibility in the application of agency rules and regulations given the unique needs of the population programs like YouthBuild serve.

YouthBuild is demonstrating that creating an environment in which disconnected and alienated youth and young adults feel respected, appreciated and empowered, one in which motivation is fostered, accomplishment is expected and exposure to one's better self is made possible, can produce remarkably positive social outcomes. The programs highlight what can be accomplished by well trained staff who believe that education is the only path to freedom and are committed to making that path available to a population who may have lost their way.

About the Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies

a part of the School of Public Affairs and Public Administration, Rutgers -Newark

The Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies is a signature effort by Rutgers University to focus the intellectual talent and resources of the institution in service to Newark and its surrounding region and beyond. Housed in the School of Public Affairs and Administration at Rutgers-Newark, the Cornwall Center encourages and conducts relevant research and hosts learning opportunities aimed at improving the cultural, social, and economic development of the community, city, and region in which the Center resides.

The Center is named after the late Joseph C. Cornwall, a widely respected civic leader and the founding Chair of The Fund for New Jersey. Mr. Cornwall devoted much of his career to advancing the welfare and quality of life for New Jersey's citizens. To recognize Mr. Cornwall's civic and philanthropic accomplishments, the Fund for New Jersey established an endowment to support and perpetuate the Center and its mission to improve the lives for people who live in cities and the surrounding metropolis.

The Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies' mission is to research and analyze complex issues facing urban areas, primarily metropolitan Newark and northern New Jersey and ultimately generate solutions to those challenges. We accept that in a globalized world, the prosperity of our region is intertwined with other regions and places. As such, our mission and geographic reach recognizes that we have to incorporate the wider study of global trends and developments as they impact our region. The Center and its staff accomplishes our mission by

- Promoting and conducting scholarly research on the evolution of cities and metropolitan places
- Encouraging applied research that will improve public policies and expand opportunity structures for communities and people in the region
- Sharing knowledge and facilitating the exchange of ideas among all stakeholders
- Encouraging informed community voice in shaping public policy
- Working with our colleagues throughout the Rutgers University system to harness the institution's rich experience, scholarship and commitment in service of urban and metropolitan communities

Contact:

Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies
47 Bleeker Street
Newark, NJ 07102
Tel.: 973-353-1750
Fax: 973-353-1753