

POINT OF VIEW

The Campaign for Tomorrow's Workforce Strengthen New York by Reconnecting Our Youth

New York City faces a civic crisis of “disconnected” youth and young adults: over 163,000 young people ages 16 through 24, who are not in school, nor in the labor force. When we add in the additional numbers of “unemployed” young adults, who are actively seeking work but unable to find it, the total rises to more than 220,000. These young people – notably youth of color from low-income communities – are at high risk of becoming permanently disengaged from the labor market, threatening their ability to break out of the cycle of poverty. Their idleness represents unfulfilled human potential. It also reflects a failure to effectively provide young people with the support they deserve to succeed and make a positive transition to adulthood.

The numbers of disconnected youth have grown significantly in recent years, reaching their highest levels, over 167,000, at the low point of the economic downturn in 2003. Data for 2007 shows that four years later, after an economic upswing and strong efforts at school reform, that number has barely changed. Given our current economic downturn, we fear that the number of disconnected youth will rise again to even higher levels. We must act now to keep this crisis from ballooning further.

Every New Yorker has a stake in this struggle. When our young people lack the skills that local industries need and are unable to support themselves, we all bear the financial costs of a weaker economy, smaller tax base, and higher expenditures on public benefits. When youth are not engaged in school and work, our communities are less vibrant and more divided.

A great opportunity is hidden within this civic crisis. In the coming years, the combination of growth in certain industries and an aging workforce will produce sizeable new openings in the labor market. Young adults with the skills to compete for these jobs will be well positioned to seize this opportunity, obtain employment, and contribute to their families and the larger economy – to become “tomorrow’s workforce.” We cannot afford to continue wasting the energy, talent, and potential of any young adult in New York.

Who are the disconnected youth?

New York City’s disconnected youth are almost equally male and female but overwhelmingly Latino and African-American. Approximately 35 percent are ages 16 to 19, with 65 percent ages 20 to 24. Small, but not insignificant numbers of disconnected youth are also young people who face other challenges, e.g. aging out of foster care, exiting

the juvenile justice system, learning disabilities and emotional or behavioral health issues. Disconnected youth may also be recent immigrant youth/English language learners, runaway and homeless youth (where a sizeable number are LGBT), as well as parenting teens and caregivers.

Disconnected youth are diverse, with a range of talents, skills, and interests. Many have extremely low skill levels and will require literacy and basic skills improvement. Others are more prepared, but still need work to complete high school. Some have high school diplomas or GEDs, but need assistance making the transition to work and/or further schooling. Almost all would benefit from more work experience and training.

There are many reasons why young people disconnect. Youth who drop out of school report feeling unsafe, unengaged, or unprepared. Others have family responsibilities that require them to earn income or be a caregiver. Many disconnected young adults have finished high school but do not see a clear path to college or training. Others try to find work but lack the skills, connections, or understanding of the job market.

What Can Be Done

The good news is that we know how to offer young people a second chance. Organizations are succeeding in re-engaging disconnected youth and building their skills by offering programs that integrate three important types of services:

- Educational services that include counseling to assist those eligible and willing to return to high school to earn a diploma, and/or intensive literacy instruction to prepare for and obtain a GED;
- Career development, including “hard” and “soft” skills training, and supported work experiences, such as internships; and
- Wrap around supportive services that help young people address other needs and overcome challenges (e.g. housing, mental health, etc.) to learning and building skills in second-chance programs.

These services are tailored to a young adult’s skill levels, goals, and particular life circumstances. Successful program environments are intimate in size, offering young adults a sense of belonging, and greater attention and encouragement to help them grow and flourish. Sustained, caring, one-on-one relationships between youth and adults underpin service delivery and help overcome the social barriers that contribute to disconnection. Effective programs understand that all young people are assets, who offer us the promise of a prosperous future.

There has never been a more important time



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to build successful programming to re-engage young people. With the high numbers of disconnected youth, employers across New York State are wondering how they will find skilled workers for job openings that arise. Demographic data illustrates that an aging workforce will result in retiring workers in industries such as healthcare, construction, automotive maintenance, aviation, commercial driving, science and technology, and manufacturing. These industries offer good paying jobs and benefits, where one can build a career. An individual that acquires the right skills can fill these job openings, and earn a good living. Emerging industries such as renewable energy, efficient waste processing, and sustainable building offer additional opportunities to equip disconnected young adults with skills that meet the demands of a rapidly changing workforce. These “green-collar jobs,” which cannot be easily outsourced overseas, provide good work to employees and environmental benefits to society at large. We must ensure that any investments in disconnected youth programs connect to the specific needs of our evolving economy. If we make the right decisions now, we can develop a steady and reliable supply of qualified workers to meet the State’s future workforce needs. Disconnected youth and young adults can be part of this pool of workers, but only if we invest and scale up effective programs that are currently too small. Our political, business, and civic leaders must summon the courage to commit to an interdisciplinary partnership to create a system of programs and services for disconnected youth. We can achieve this by taking the following steps:

- Greater public investment in comprehensive programs that integrate the three categories of services that disconnected youth need;
- Technical assistance to scale up the capacity of existing programs and create new ones;
- Targeted investment in young adult literacy programs, as well as GED programs that connect to college and careers;
- Public/private partnerships to develop job and internship opportunities for young people participating in these programs.

How You Can Help

In order to advocate for the public policy response we need, the Community Service Society, Neighborhood Family Services Coalition, and United Neighborhood Houses have joined to coordinate the Campaign for Tomorrow’s Workforce. Currently, over 35 organizations have endorsed our Campaign, and we encourage all interested parties to join as well (www.campaignfortomorrowworkforce.org).

In the coming year, we will continue to build awareness among policymakers about the programs and approaches that serve as solutions to re-engaging disconnected youth. We appreciate the initial efforts of the Bloomberg administration in reaching disconnected youth through several programs being implemented by the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) in partnership with the non-profit sector. The adopted 2008-09 State budget included a Career Pathways initiative, where 60 percent of that funding will go toward programs for low-wage young adults ages 18 to 24. This is an encouraging step toward a larger State role in supportive comprehensive programs that specifically target disconnected youth.

Join us in ensuring that these youth have a brighter future, and that society will meet its future workforce needs. We will need partners from government, education, business, and non-profits to promote and grow positive and promising programs. We can’t give up on these young people, and by working together, we can ensure a strong “Tomorrow’s Workforce,” that capitalizes on the talent of all young adults.

This op-ed was written by the coordinators of The Campaign for Tomorrow’s Workforce (www.campaignfortomorrowworkforce.org) -- Community Service Society (Lazar Treschan), United Neighborhood Houses (Anthony Ng), and the Neighborhood Family Services Coalition (Ashok Kamal).

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