

Powerful Pathways

Framing Options and Opportunities for Vulnerable Youth

A Discussion Paper of the

Youth Transition Funders Group

“It isn’t that I didn’t know where I wanted to be, it’s just that it took a while to figure out if I could get there.”

— Chicago Youth, Age 21

Youth Transition Funders Group

The Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) includes advocates from a range of foundations and policy makers. Regardless of the departments or systems in which we work — education, workforce development, human services, higher education, child welfare, youth development, juvenile justice, welfare, or mental health — we are committed to operating across boundaries to reduce barriers and create opportunities for vulnerable youth. The YTFG focuses on two overlapping areas of work:

- **Expanding high quality educational opportunities** for vulnerable youth — both for those in school and those re-enrolling through alternative education and workforce development;
- **Integrating youth development principles** into the systems with which youth interact, especially deep-end systems such as juvenile justice, welfare, foster care and workforce development.

The YTFG shares information through a bi-weekly electronic newsletter, periodic conference calls, site visits and meetings. We work aggressively to get the interests of vulnerable youth on the agendas of policy makers and foundations. For more information contact:

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YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH FUND

The Youth Development and Research Fund (YDRF) is a for-profit, minority owned corporation whose mission is to help high-risk youth to develop options beyond the streets and to provide positive information for the Hip-Hop Generation. YDRF works to accomplish this task by improving programs and policies for youth through research, training, products and YDRF's niche — youth cultural competence. YDRF provides operational support to the Youth Transition Funders Group. For more information, visit YDRF's Web site at www.ydrf.com.



The Forum for Youth Investment (the Forum) was created to increase the quality and quantity of youth investments and youth involvement by promoting a big picture approach to planning, research, advocacy and policy development among the broad range of national organizations that help constituents and communities invest in children, youth and families. To do this, the Forum commits itself to building connections, increasing capacity and tackling persistent challenges within the youth fields, frequently providing backroom support to organizations and coalitions seeking to reframe issues and ideas about youth. The Forum worked closely with the Youth Transition Funders Group to prepare this paper. For more information, visit the Forum's Web site at www.forumforyouthinvestment.org.

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*D*ear Colleagues:

On behalf of the Youth Transition Funders Group (YTTFG), I am delighted to offer you *Powerful Pathways*. The insights, inspirations and future directions offered within are a culmination of five years of hard work to frame policies and programs directed at our most vulnerable youth.

The YTTFG was established in 1995 by advocates from a range of foundations and policy makers. Regardless of the systems in which we work — education, workforce development, human services, special education, higher education, youth development, juvenile justice — we are committed to operating across boundaries to reduce barriers and create opportunities for vulnerable youth. This is not always easy — systems are complex, some are in disarray and some isolate young people by design. It has forced us to become more adept at understanding institutional racism and its impact on children's life trajectories. Yet, the analysis and framework that has developed, focusing on youth across systems and silos, is indeed creating powerful pathways for our own work.

We ask your forgiveness if you are uncomfortable with any of the language we use to talk about youth. Words and phrases we use to describe vulnerability are often spun on their heads until we are right back where we started with a deficit model that holds youth fully responsible for the choices they make without acknowledging the process, the context of those decisions, or how public institutions shaped them. We lack words, especially those acceptable in policy discussions, to refer to the enormous spirit, creativity, determination and intelligence young people demonstrate in trying to sort through the limited options available to them.

And our language doesn't sufficiently capture what happens when young people transform their lives. Is a young person who was incarcerated always an ex-offender? Even if she is now enrolled in college? What words can we use to celebrate this young person's resilience? How can we turn that into language fit for a resume? The most extraordinary example of our antiquated language is our difficulty talking about young people who have dropped out or been pushed out of school. They are consistently referred to as out-of-school youth. Yet what do we call them when they are enrolled in a high school run by a youth employment program?

Several people have guided the work of the YTTFG and the development of *Powerful Pathways*. The coordinating committee — Talmira Hill, Peter Kleinbard, Melissa Kelley, Donna Lartigue and Kara Thompson, has shaped a flexible, entrepreneurial organization. A heartfelt thanks goes to Talmira, who has been our guiding light in shaping our thinking about youth across systems. Our deepest appreciation goes to Nicole Yohalem and Karen Pittman of the Forum for Youth Investment for synthesizing an enormous amount of information and ideas. Thanks to Ed DeJesus and Josh Weber at Youth Development and Research Fund for their ongoing leadership and support. Thanks also to practitioners, teachers and youth workers — those who walk the distance with young people every day. Their commitment challenges us to never give up. And most of all, young people offer us the deepest inspiration. If they can transform their lives, we can certainly transform the systems that are designed to serve and support them.

In closing, this document was prepared before the tragic events and sorrows of September 11th. We dedicate this paper and our work to raising the next generation of young people to provide loving, creative leadership.

We look forward to working with you.

Chris Sturgis, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
and the YTTFG Coordinating Committee



Powerful Pathways

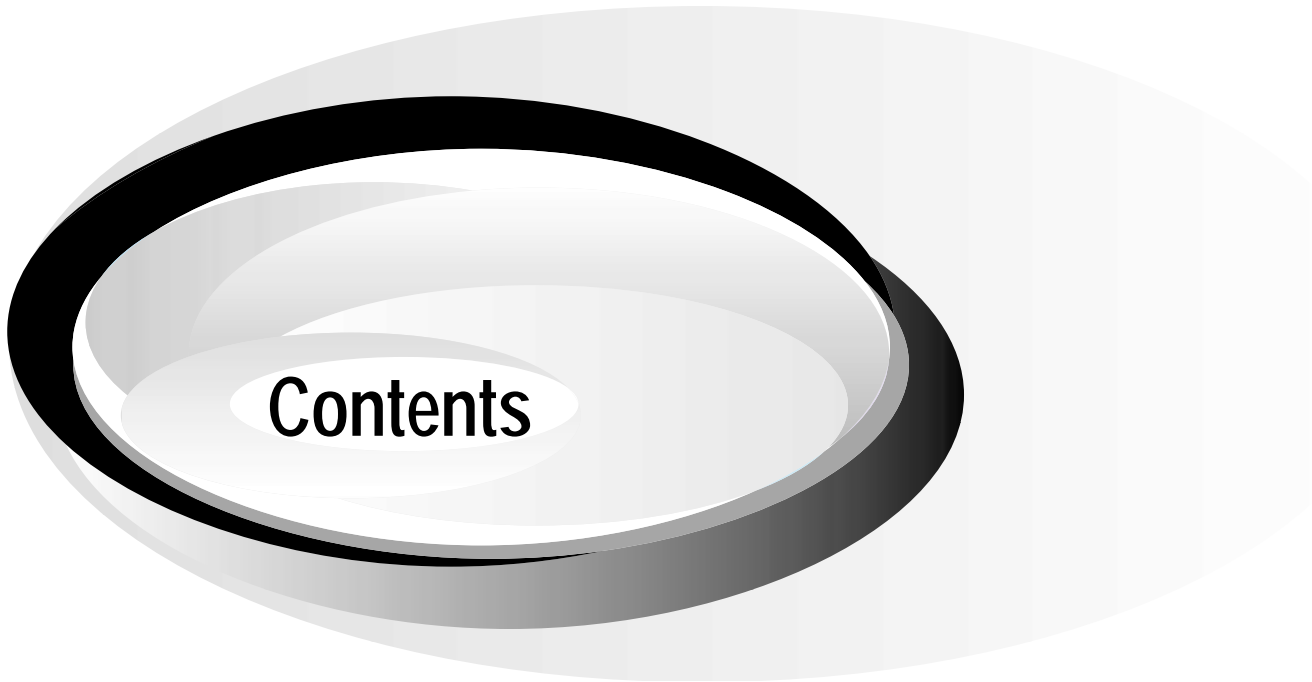
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October 2001

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The Forum for Youth Investment



Introduction 1

Vulnerable Futures 3

 Who are Vulnerable Youth? 4

 Race and Class Matter 6

 Education’s Pivotal Role 7

The Imperatives: Development, Transition, Transformation ... 11

 The Developmental Imperative 11

 The Transitional Imperative 13

 The Transformational Imperative 14

Promising Strategies 17

 Aligning Systems to Ensure Education and Career Development 21

 Innovations at the Policy Level 26

 Changing Perceptions and Building Public Will 28

Recommendations for the Work Ahead 31

References 35



Introduction

Scattered throughout the philanthropic, research, practice and advocacy communities are individuals and organizations intentionally focusing resources and attention on our most vulnerable young people. While their strategies vary — systems reform, alternative education, community-wide webs of support, juvenile justice after care — they have several things in common.

First, when working with the most vulnerable, disenfranchised young people, they not only refuse to give up, but have a deep appreciation of these youth and a powerful commitment to nurture their development. They know that each and every young person, no matter how off-course she appears to have gone, has the ability and desire to turn her life around. Second, they see the range of transitions that vulnerable youth face — from jail back into the community, from a foster family to independent living, or from school into college — as **powerful opportunities** for developing skills and building resiliency. Third, they are willing to confront the **powerful barriers** challenging young people, including fragmented systems and rigid silos. Finally, they are willing to form new and creative alliances to generate the **powerful capital** — political, social, and economic — needed to transform systems and to support young people in their development.

All youth need support as they make the passage from adolescence to adulthood. Some youth need extra support. A growing body of knowledge recognizes the cumulative impact of stressful life events during transition periods. Alienating institutions, discrimination and the hardships that come with poverty and from lacking the skills necessary to tend to the economic and social responsibilities of adulthood not only demoralize many young people, but leave many struggling to make the best decisions they can without clear direction or support. Research on

the complexity of these challenges points to the need for not just transitional but **transformational** services, supports and opportunities that help our most vulnerable young people reconnect with themselves and their futures.

The good news is that everything we know about development suggests that vulnerable, ill-served youth — even those who carry with them a decade of inadequate services and poor behavior — can transform their lives when support is delivered comprehensively, consistently and in ways that respect their voices and recognize and build on their strengths. Initiatives highlighted in this paper and throughout the best practice literature demonstrate that the comprehensive strategies needed to support these young people are both within our reach and cost-effective. Many organizations have developed strategies — **powerful pathways** that support vulnerable youth.

Regardless of what paths young people take, they all need to arrive at the same place: ready to take advantage of college-level education and training — with the skills they need to participate fully in mainstream institutions, including the workplace, higher education and the political process. This paper reflects on what we know about that challenge. And we know a lot — about who vulnerable young people are, the obstacles they face, the integrated, comprehensive strategies that can help them transform their lives and the perceptions that must shift in order for long-term change to take hold. The challenge is to capitalize on this knowledge, expand it and turn it into meaningful action on behalf of this nation's most vulnerable youth.



Vulnerable Futures

Few will argue with the fact that the transition from adolescence to adulthood is full of excitement, wonder, wrong turns and challenges. Add to that transition one or more factors facing millions of today's youth — e.g., poor education, abuse, homelessness, discrimination, involvement in the juvenile justice or foster care systems, poverty — and that transition becomes exponentially more challenging and statistically more devastating. These stumbling blocks can be powerful, blocking from view possibilities and options. But they never completely dampen young people's desires to make a better life for themselves and their families.

New findings from Child Trends suggest that in the year 1999, 4.9 million youth ages 14–24 in the United States qualified as vulnerable. In this case, **vulnerable youth** was defined with a fairly narrow lens, including those youth expected to “age out” or leave a large public system within that year (foster care, juvenile justice, welfare); youth who were or had been homeless; youth who were out of school and had not graduated; or youth with an incarcerated parent (Wertheimer et al, 2001). Even using this narrow definition, this accounts for nearly 10 percent of the youth population.

While 4.9 million is a significant number, it is important to note that vulnerability extends well beyond this group. While these data include out-of-school youth, they do not take into consideration those youth who have remained in school but are woefully ill-prepared for college or the workforce. For example, in 1998, only 31 percent of students entering 8th grade were considered proficient readers.¹

¹ Data from the 1998 Grade 8 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Proficiency Report Card.

The Transition Out of Foster Care

Ironically, just as foster children reach the most vulnerable period of their lives, they are cut off from most services. Research has shown that youth “emancipated” from the foster care system face a host of challenges. Westat (1991) studied 34,600 youth who aged out of the foster care system. Two to four years later:

- only about half had completed high school;
- fewer than half had jobs;
- fewer than 1 in 5 were economically self-sufficient;
- 25 percent had been homeless at least one night; and
- 60 percent of the females had given birth.

And, while these data focus in on those youth transitioning **out** of public systems each year, a group well worth identifying and supporting, they do not take into account those youth in the care of systems who will not age-out in the current year, or those youth considered at risk of entering those systems. For example, while Wertheimer found that roughly 457,000 youth ages 14–24 leave incarceration yearly after serving a sentence of some kind,² courts with juvenile jurisdiction handled nearly 1.8 million delinquency cases in 1997 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000).

Recent data compiled in the edited volume *America’s Disconnected Youth* (Besharov, 1999) suggest that disconnection from mainstream society is not uncommon for youth ages 17 and over — up to 8 percent of whites, 13 percent of blacks and up to 15 percent of Hispanics. Disconnection is defined as not being enrolled in school, not employed, not in the military and not married to someone who met at least one of the criteria for 26 weeks or more out of any calendar year. Disconnection appears to be relatively benign in small quantities, but toxic in multiple doses. Disconnection during three or more years can lead to high poverty rates for men and women and higher incarceration rates for men.³ Disconnection does not happen overnight; it is a process exacerbated by a combination of daily stresses and alienating institutions.

Regardless of methodology used to quantify how many millions of youth are vulnerable, the unconscionable fact is that currently, services designed to reconnect young people to mainstream institutions are available for only a small fraction of those who need them.⁴

Who are Vulnerable Youth?

Vulnerability stems from a complex web of circumstances and events. **Life and family circumstances** such as poverty, violence, disruption and job loss contribute to vulnerability. **Systems** themselves can contribute to vulnerability, particularly in the case of minority youth who experience the cumulative impact of discrimination. And the transitions inherent in **adolescence** itself, while full of

² The number of youth leaving incarceration is difficult to identify for a range of reasons. This conservative estimate is limited to those persons who have not only been detained, but were detained and subsequently committed to a facility.

³ At ages 25 to 28, for youth disconnected during three or more transitional young adult years, their median family income was about \$18,000 for men and \$15,000 for women; about 44 percent of the long-term disconnected men and 56 percent of the women were in poverty; 34 percent of the women received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC); and 48 percent received food stamps; and men were six times more likely to have spent time in jail or a youth correctional facility.

⁴ According to YouthBuild USA, federally funded “second chance” programs designed to target this population — such as Job Corps, YouthBuild and the National Guard Challenge — together provide a total of 200,000 full-time openings each year.

positive possibility, can also contribute to vulnerability. While their experiences vary tremendously, as a group, vulnerable youth tend to share many characteristics. Who are they?

- **They are young people with dreams who may appear to give up because they believe no one cares enough to help.** Vulnerable youth are aware of how the public perceives them. “Adults tend to think of us as trouble . . . they just want to get us off the streets and out of sight, throw us somewhere . . . you understand what I am saying? Nobody seems to give a shit about what would help us find a good path . . .” (McLaughlin, 2000).
- **They are young people who often have limited options when it comes to education, early employment and support.** They attend low-performing schools, have ill-prepared teachers, live in under-resourced communities with few options (positive places to go, things to do, people to talk to), and have few job alternatives. “A lot of D.C. schools just don’t have teachers,” commented a high school senior during a panel discussion on high school reform (Forum for Youth Investment, 2000). “My human anatomy and physiology class doesn’t have a teacher yet. We were told we were going to have one Monday. We still don’t have one . . . All we do is sit, and all she [the substitute] does is sit and watch us.”
- **They are young people who have been “serviced” by many, but supported and encouraged by few.** They are not strangers to the systems but often become strangers to the teachers, welfare workers, counselors, probation officers, school administrators, faith leaders and youth workers who interact with them. They are young people for whom in-school/out-of-school, in-the system/out-of-the system, and on-welfare/off-welfare are often artificial distinctions of questionable significance.
- **They are young people with powerful ideas and strong voices that often go unheard.** Typically discussed in terms of their potential cost to society, vulnerable youth also represent a huge potential benefit to society. When provided with access and an audience, they often become not only productive citizens, but powerful advocates. Programs like Urban Retrievers in Philadelphia, and LISTEN in Washington, D.C., successfully engage vulnerable youth as advocates and organizers. Across the country young people are organizing to build the public will to bring about reform in their high schools. Programs like YO! and Youth Communication provide outlets for youth whose voices often go unheard.
- **They are young people with families and responsibilities.** Many young people, especially those in poverty, take on adult responsibilities early in their teens. Young people may earn money to supplement their family’s income or provide child support to their own children. They may be unable to attend after-school programs because they are responsible for caring for siblings or their own children. We need to be aware of our own biases that place young women in these roles but often fail to realize that young men often struggle with the roles of parent, caretaker and breadwinner.

“Tanya . . . was in foster care for 14 years until her 18th birthday. When she found out she’d been discharged, she was shocked: ‘I thought they were supposed to keep me until I was 21.’ . . . Tanya was in the dark on how to survive. Since then she’s been homeless. How could the system be a better stepping stone? ‘They should have some type of real independent living program,’ Tanya said, ‘before they just terminate people they should make sure they have everything straight, like a job, high school diploma, at least some type of training or skills before they just cut people off.’”

— Matthew Dedewo
Youth Communication

Race and Class Matter

When we look at who is vulnerable, it is impossible to ignore the fact that race and class matter. When nearly any set of data about education, employment and well-being of young people is disaggregated, racial and socio-economic disparities emerge.

Many vulnerable youth have faced discrimination on multiple fronts, in the very systems designed to support them. Disproportionate confinement within the justice system, over representation in special education and institutionalized racism within the health care system are all well-documented (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999; Oswald & Coutinho, 2000; Themba-Nixon, 2001). The cumulative impact of these experiences, combined with widespread negative media portrayals of minority youth undermines the developmental trajectory.

Direct and indirect messages that adults, schools, communities, police and employers send out affect how young people think of themselves and the opportunities available to them in the future. Imagine the impact of these messages on young people's development and aspirations. Messages suggesting:

- ... **that schools aren't necessarily interested in teaching them.** Students attending secondary schools with large concentrations of poor children are 1.8 times as likely as students attending low-poverty schools to have teachers without a major in their subject. Similarly, students attending high minority schools are 1.4 times as likely as those in low minority schools to be taught by under-qualified teachers (The Education Trust, 1998).
- ... **that schools don't necessarily want them.** Twenty-five percent of all African-American students, nationally, were suspended at least once over a four-year period (The Civil Rights Project, 2000).
- ... **that jails do.** In every offense category a substantially greater percentage of African-American youth were detained than white youth. While white youth comprised 66 percent of the juvenile court referrals, they comprised 53 percent of the detained population. In contrast, African-American youth made up 31 percent of the referrals and 44 percent of the detained population (Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2000).
- ... **and that it doesn't change when they become adults.** The Fair Employment Council determined that one in four employers discriminate based on race and ethnicity. Through face-to-face testing, the Council found that the rate of overall discrimination for Latinos is roughly 22 percent and for African Americans, 24 percent. In tests where whites and African Americans were offered the same job, whites received 20 percent higher starting wages (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001).

"I have lived in the public housing projects of New York City most of my life. It seems as though everyone has a preconceived notion of what someone living in the projects looks and acts like. No one expects anything positive from us . . . As much as I hate the stereotypes, it is even harder to come home everyday and see the kids on the streets doing exactly what society expects of them. I never understood why someone would choose a lifestyle that would only lead to self-destruction, until I realized that for many it's not a choice . . . I am fortunate enough to have family that is involved and concerned in my life choices . . ."

— Puerto Rican Youth, Age 17

Education's Pivotal Role

Formal education is one of the most powerful factors in determining the labor market success of adults in the United States. Who has jobs, what kinds of jobs they have and how much they earn all depend more than anything else on degree of formal education. While this is critical to keep in mind in any discussion of youth preparation and development, it is also critical to recognize that there are effective strategies for improving the labor market success of youth who have left the formal educational system⁵ (Sum et al, 2000).

No matter who does the analysis, two things are clear given the current economic reality. First, some post-secondary education and solid cognitive, decision making, as well as people skills are the tickets to success in the 21st century labor market (Murnane & Levy, 1996). Access to and the application of knowledge plays a critical role in the workplace. And, due to rapid shifts in the economy, most individuals will re-train for new industries and technologies at some point in their lives.

Second, there are already millions of youth out of school, with or without diplomas, who are not prepared to succeed in this labor market. Without access to college-level training, these young people will be locked into a life of poverty. Forced into survival mode and short-term decision making, many will end up in low-skill, low-wage jobs, on welfare, or in prison. Young people, their families and their communities are left carrying the burden when we fail to provide an adequate education. All of us will pay more as a result of escalating prison costs and public services than we would if we were committed to their full involvement on the front end.

These facts have created a new dilemma. The country must either find ways to reinvent a secondary education system that not only graduates more students but also graduates competent, confident learners, or creatively fill the growing number of high-skill jobs. There are growing practical and political pressures to implement the first option. Those pressures, however, may not be sufficient to ensure that **all** young people benefit fully:

- **Some school reform efforts may push under-educated students out or leave them behind.** The standards movement is one of the most powerful education reforms actually reaching into the classroom. For the first time in our history, we are expecting schools to educate all children, regardless of their backgrounds or ethnicity. Will the standards movement pull traditionally under-served students through school by improving their education or push them out sooner? The answer depends on the strategies. While some efforts are beginning to pay off, strategies that change expectations or situations without changing supports may have limited or even harmful effects.

“The future is not a zero-sum game to be played out at the expense of our children. Our communities know the importance of educating our young people so that they are delivered from involvement that could lead them into the prison industrial complex.”

— Reverend Eugene Williams III,
Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches

⁵ Employer-led job training, apprenticeships and classroom training directly linked to employer commitment are all strategies that have documented impact. Short-term training which does not lead to a specific job placement has not demonstrated long-term effects.

“Our nation seeks to improve schools by calling for higher standards and more frequent assessment — tools aimed at improving accountability. While data and achievement indicators are critical for measuring progress and identifying disparities in outcomes, our tools are imperfect. We need high quality instruction and family involvement. We need measurement tools that are effective across diverse groups of young people. We need to refine our ability to interpret data in ways that lead to multifaceted strategies for improvement. Though many would use data to infer the likely failure or success of young people, an underlying philosophical stance of our work is to challenge the predictability of failure.”

— Talmira Hill
Co-founder,
Youth Transition Funders Group

Bi-partisan support to end social promotion may exacerbate rather than address the problem that many youth perform below grade level. High stakes testing, without proper supports, may limit instruction and demoralize low-achieving students. Some states are considering re-institutionalizing tracking systems by creating different levels of high school diplomas.

- **Rigorous zero tolerance enforcement in schools may not only push more students out, but keep them out.** Increasingly, young people suspended or expelled for rule violations are kept from returning to their original schools and to the educational system as a whole. Racial, gender and income disparities in suspension and expulsion rates are increasing; such policies are more common in predominantly black and Latino districts; and black and Latino children are more likely to be disciplined for minor misconduct and to receive punishments disproportionate to that conduct. Suspension is a predictor of dropping out of school; zero tolerance policies can create a downward spiral that can ultimately lead to incarceration (The Civil Rights Project, 2000).
- **Alternative educational strategies for young people who leave school or are expelled have been slow to emerge and slower to grow to scale.** Academically rigorous, engaging alternative schools are few and far between. Funding, capacity and leadership problems plague public and non-profit programs designed to meet the needs of youth who have dropped out or been expelled. Few teacher quality improvement efforts have focused on alternative education programs (Lewis, 2000). Poor, minority and disabled youth are disproportionately represented in alternative school enrollment figures. Therefore, the perception of alternative schools as “holding pens” for those who don’t fit the traditional mold could be contributing to a de facto form of segregation.

By the time a student reaches the third grade, many teachers and researchers believe they can predict whether he will succeed in school. By middle school, students themselves and families believe they can predict this — young people become divided into two camps, on-track and off-track. And their experiences, in and outside of school, are often quite different. By high school, the coursework and professionals in their lives are often very different.

These young people get categorized many different ways and labeled many things — abused, adjudicated, homeless, delinquent. What they share is the fact that their futures are in question because they have been ill-served by the systems designed to ensure their protection, address their problems and guide their academic, civic and vocational preparation.

A separate patchwork of programs created especially for vulnerable youth would be inherently unequal — there is not enough public or political will to hold such a system accountable for anything more than basic maintenance. And, the “fix problems first” assumption that would characterize such a system runs counter to the dynamics of development. While the problems facing vulnerable youth must be addressed, they must be addressed in the context of a commitment to overall development — the relationships, networks, challenges, opportunities to contribute — that motivate growth and change.

But non-responsive public systems are inevitably dangerous. If those systems — education, foster care, social services, juvenile justice, welfare, workforce preparation — that touch young people and their families are not held accountable for assisting them in the process of preparing for post-secondary education and employment, the young people with the greatest potential for positive growth will be further excluded from the mainstream.

“There are over 5 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who have lost their way. Young people who, for a variety of reasons, have gone down a path, hit a dead end and are now looking for a way back to the main road. They want to be well educated, they want to work, they want to support their families, they want to contribute.

“But they cannot find the path. They don’t need transitional programs, they need transformational experiences — opportunities to re-establish their lives favorably against their own ideas of who they are and what they want to be. They need pathways. They need us as partners.”

— Dorothy Stoneman
President, YouthBuild USA

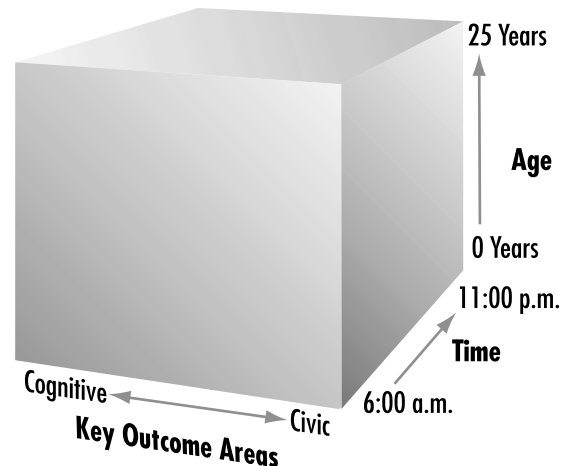
The Imperatives: Development, Transition, Transformation

The Developmental Imperative

We know three basic things about the developmental process from infancy to adulthood:

- **It takes about 25 years, all of which are important.** There is no definitive way to divide these years into periods. The important thing is to understand the critical developmental shifts that take place between early childhood and young adulthood. Investments should start early and be sustained through-out at least the first two decades of life. For youth who take a wrong turn, this period may be extended. The transition to adulthood isn't complete until young people are on education and career trajectories leading to a family wage.
- **It spans a broad range of developmental outcome areas.** Academic preparation is critical, but it is not enough. Cognitive, career, social, civic, physical and moral/spiritual development all must be attended to if young people are to be successful at the big tasks of the first three decades of life: finding a way to be productive, figuring out who they are and finding someone with whom to spend their lives.

Figure 1: The Cube



By taking the three basics we know about the developmental process and making them the axes of a cube, we create a clear picture of the developmental imperative.

Development Occurs Across a Range of Interrelated Domains

Social/Emotional Development. The ability to respond to and cope with positive and adverse situations, reflect on one's emotions and surroundings, engage in leisure and fun and sustain caring friendships and relationships.

Moral/Spiritual Development. Exploration of assumptions, beliefs and values in an ongoing process of understanding how one relates to others and the larger world.

Civic Development. Recognition of one's impact on one's surroundings and responsibility to others, as well as the ability and opportunity to work collaboratively with others for a common goal.

Career Development. Acquiring the functional and organizational skills necessary for employment, including an understanding of careers and pathways to reach goals.

Physical Development. Biological maturation and the increasing ability to act in ways that ensure current and future physical health for self and others.

Cognitive Development. The ability to gain basic knowledge; learn in school and other settings; use critical thinking, creative, problem solving and expressive skills; and conduct independent study.

Personal/Cultural Development. Increasing awareness of one's own identity, including racial/ethnic identity.

— Pittman et al, forthcoming

• **It goes on all the time.** Youth are influenced during all hours of the day. While most industrial cultures have created formal institutions for academic and vocational learning, a majority of development still occurs outside of these institutions. And, developmental progress within them is often dependent upon the supports that exist in families and communities. Schools cannot do this alone.

Combined, these three “givens” create a space that defines the development imperative: each morning, young people wake up needing things to do, people to talk to and places to be that can, in some way, support their development. The more intentional families, communities and institutions are about providing supports and opportunities and guiding and monitoring progress, the better young people will fare.

And what happens when we aren't intentional? Whether we realize it or not, youth are already exposed to countless sources of bad information, bad advice and bad role modeling. Without clear and consistent direction, youth will follow what is most accessible and most acceptable — what they think will most help them to survive. Unfortunately, too many young people find out too late that this kind of street survival doesn't equate with mainstream success.

The more effort spent making sure young people are not just out of the red in each developmental area (e.g., not pregnant, not illiterate, not unemployed) but fully prepared and fully engaged in each area (e.g., involved in peer health education, academically motivated, participating in a career apprenticeship) the better young people and society will fare. These are fairly obvious statements. But a picture like “the Cube” helps take the focus off of systems and services and put it back on youth themselves, forcing a comprehensive view. The space defined by “the Cube” begs for ongoing monitoring and intentionality about how, when, why and by whom it gets filled (Pittman & Ferber, 2001).

The Transitional Imperative

During adolescence, the developmental imperative can in fact be framed as a **transitional** imperative. The changes that occur during ages 12–25 are complex and happen simultaneously at many levels. Recent demographic shifts and changing labor market demands mean that the early adulthood years have become as transitional as the teen years. “There is no longer a small, easily understood set of patterns for the transition to adulthood — making the years between 18 and 25 as challenging a period of life as adolescence (Eccles et al, 2001).”

At the same time that they engage in the daily process of growth across the full range of developmental areas (cognitive, social, civic, physical, moral/spiritual, etc.), older youth are making important transitions within many of those domains: out of high school into college and/or the workforce, out of the family home, etc. Each of those transitions involves important choices that shape the rest of their lives. Young people’s success is influenced by how prepared they are when they hit these transition points, how familiar they are with the institutions designed to support them and how committed those institutions are to their success.

Of those young people who arrive at transitions along a “normative” path — setting aside for a moment those youth who have wound up in a deep-end public system like juvenile justice or foster care — some are of course more prepared than others to deal with the challenges they will encounter. We cannot underestimate the value of families’ social capital in helping young people move easily through these transitions.

For those vulnerable youth **also** transitioning out of public systems like juvenile justice or foster care back into their communities, the reintegration challenges they face add an additional layer of complexity into their lives just as they are trying also to make the expected transitions out of adolescence to adulthood. These are not simple processes. They include questions of survival — housing, food, health care, education, transportation, safety and income. Without these anchors in place young people can face homelessness, illness and worse. With them young people can achieve great things.

“I dropped out of high school in 1994. It was my junior year, and I was having a lot of problems such as passing classes, feeling safe, and addressing financial concerns . . . As run-ins with the law began to increase, I began to think twice about how I was living . . .

“When I started at YouthBuild, I immediately felt that this was where I needed to be at that point in my life . . . YouthBuild is a great program for anyone who’s interested in a new start. YouthBuild is a pretty cool place to begin. While participating in YouthBuild, I’ve moved from the life of a gang member without a future to the life of a prospective construction worker with a future. If I can come that far, anyone else can also.”

— YouthBuild St. Louis Participant,
Age 20

The Transformational Imperative

The need for a strong, consistent infrastructure of support is clear, particularly in the case of vulnerable youth. Our vision, however, must extend beyond providing guidance during a series of individual transitions. As Dorothy Stoneman said, vulnerable youth “don’t need transitional programs, they need transformational experiences.”

In addition to basics such as safe, stable places and quality care and services, transformational experiences have five critical elements⁶:

1. Positive relationships and networks;
2. High expectations and clear standards;
3. Opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution;
4. Challenging experiences; and
5. High-quality instruction and training (in a range of developmental areas, i.e., social, cognitive, civic, physical).

These inputs are not optional. Not every program has to provide these at a high level for every young person. But there is a point at which programs can actually do harm by assuming that these key inputs are not within their domain. Schools, for example, that do not emphasize relationships, safety, or students’ needs for meaningful participation, can be alienating environments, especially for those young people who do not get these supports elsewhere.

These are not inputs that can be provided effectively independent of one another. Programs tend to define themselves by one or more of these inputs (e.g., drop-in/crisis centers, independent living programs, mentoring programs, self-esteem programs, service programs, academic, vocational, employment training programs), but research about young people’s needs and the effectiveness of a youth development approach stresses the need for a holistic framework that encompasses all of these inputs.

These are not givens for most vulnerable youth. Beware of the middle class bias that assumes youth have a roof over their heads, food to eat and a place to do homework. Many youth work to help their families or support their children. Although there is evidence that working more than 20 hours a week can negatively affect academic progress (Lerman, 2000), for many youth employment is a matter of survival. At a minimum, keeping vulnerable youth in school and on track (or getting them back on track) requires being cognizant of the gaps in their lives and aware of institutional and community options for filling those gaps in non-stigmatizing ways.

“Part of what makes this work compelling is that transformation is possible. It is not only possible, it is predictable given certain environments for youth.”

— Melissa Kelley
Walter S. Johnson Foundation

⁶ These components of transformational experiences are adapted from a similar list of seven inputs all youth need in order to grow and develop (Pittman & Irby, 1996).

The challenge is that this full set of inputs, critical to transformation, is often seen as more appropriate for “low risk” than for “high risk” youth. Yet evidence suggests that it is vulnerable, ill-served youth who need this approach the most and who are least likely to get it because they have been channeled into a system that defines them primarily by a single problem behavior or deficit.

Transformation is by nature comprehensive; it not only entails helping young people see a range of productive roles for their future; it often means developing a new sense of who they are and what is possible.

Friends of Island Academy

Friends of Island Academy reaches out to incarcerated young people prior to their release from Rikers Island, the biggest jail in North America. Founded in 1990, Friends provides counseling, job training, education, mentoring and youth leadership development to participants, who are in turn expected to take responsibility for rebuilding their lives and staying out of trouble.

Friends was started by a small group of professionals within the departments of Education and Correction who became alarmed when they learned that more than 70 percent of teens released from Rikers Island were re-incarcerated. Friends seeks to ensure that first-time offenses do not become an endless cycle of criminality and incarceration. Of youth who have remained in the Friends program, just over 20 percent return to jail.

Rather than considering formerly incarcerated youth as the problem, Friends creates an empowering environment and offers positive adults who view the young people participating as part of the solution. The comprehensive nature of the services cuts across the various transitions youth are facing, and puts in place a web of supports, services and opportunities that allows them to not only “get back on track” but to develop their skills and engage in new experiences.

— www.foiany.org



Promising Strategies

Youth transitions are, by definition, interdisciplinary. In the context of the overall journey to adulthood, many young people are making transitions in multiple areas such as education, employment and housing. In addition, vulnerable youth with weak or non-existent support systems could simultaneously be navigating their way out of the foster care or juvenile justice systems back into the communities they came from.

Just as the concept of transitions is complex, so are the risk factors that contribute to vulnerability. Rarely do youth present clear problems in one area while being fully prepared and fully engaged in all others. Single-focused approaches to prevention and rehabilitation often treat only one problem at a time, and that problem is not necessarily the root problem but oftentimes a symptom (e.g., juvenile offenders with mental health problems).⁷

Rarely, however, are young people deeply in the red across the board; findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that 81 percent of youth engaging in five or more risk behaviors were also engaging in at least one positive behavior (Blum & Rinehart, 1998). When they are consistently in serious trouble, it is often because they have been in and out of systems that treat only one problem, ignoring the others or, even worse, labeling, isolating and treating young people in ways that close off options for them to continue to build and use skills in areas in which they have real strengths.

“Young people come with complicated lives . . . one of our biggest expenses is case management, yet few foundations will fund this. If young people got these services outside of these programs, they would be stigmatized. We partner with a lot of outside agencies in providing these services — welfare, housing . . .”

— Angel Rodriguez
YouthBuild, Philadelphia

⁷ The literature suggests high rates of alcohol, drug and mental disorders in the juvenile justice population. A Chicago study looked at the prevalence of mental disorders among a sample of 1,829 youth in a typical detention center. Two thirds tested positive for drugs. Nearly three quarters of the females and over two thirds of the males had one or more psychiatric disorders (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000).

While the challenges are vast and complex, there is reason to be optimistic. Comprehensive interventions that provide the full web of supports necessary for vulnerable youth to make the transition to adulthood do exist. They are complex and expensive, yet vitally important **and** cost effective. There is, however, no silver bullet.

“In the Marriott Bridges from School to Work program we are moving toward a more interdisciplinary focus. A lot goes into transitions besides finding a job. We’ve focused on how to pull in other resources — community colleges, vocational schools, other services related to housing, substance abuse, family support. The degree to which we succeed in making this interdisciplinary will play a big part in determining our long-term success.”

— Mark Donovan
Marriott Foundation for
People with Disabilities

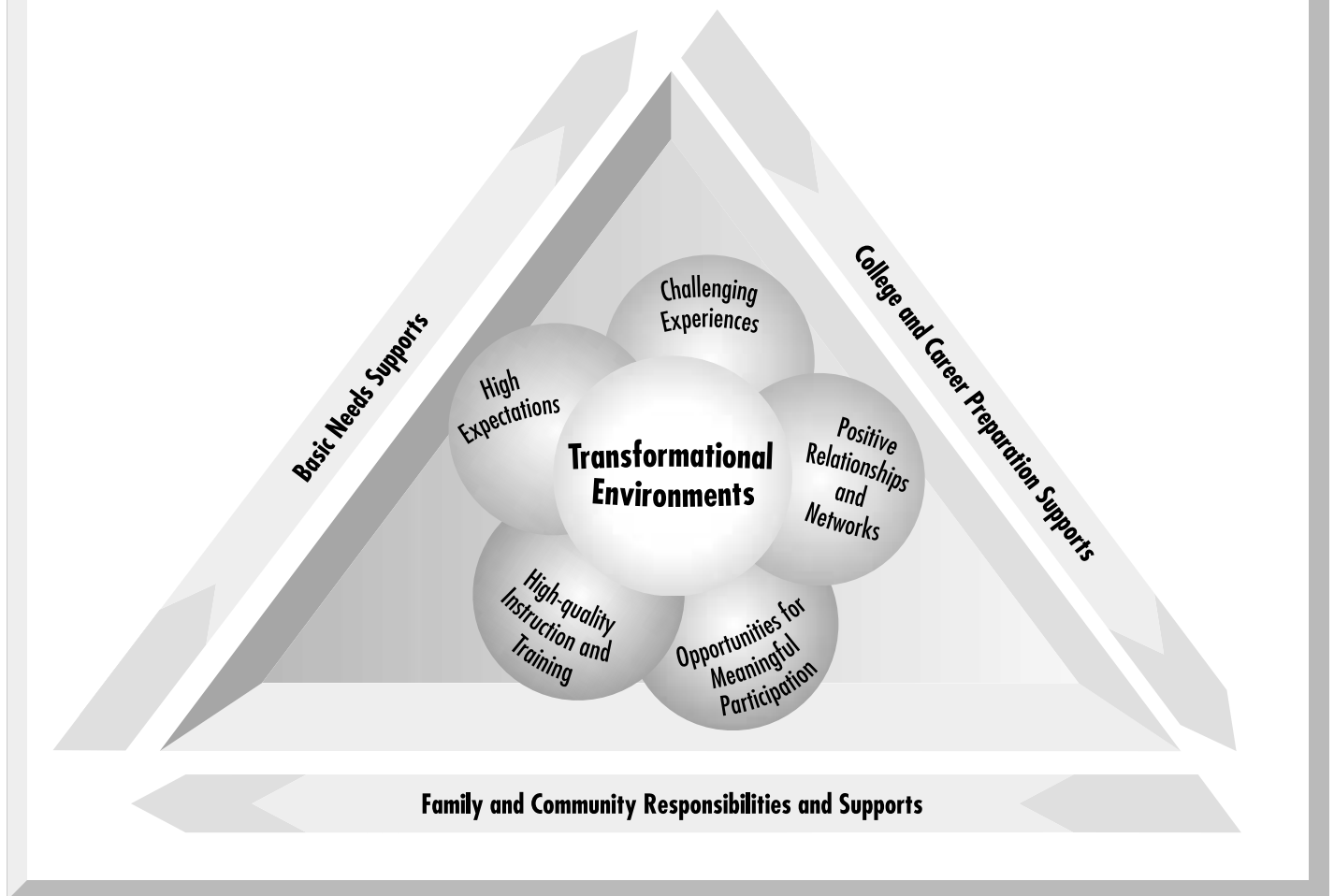
No single programmatic intervention will create the pathways necessary for all youth to achieve success in all areas of development. Because young people’s experiences at home, at school and in the community are strongly interconnected, our responses to problems that develop in any of these domains must be well integrated. We must build on and integrate what exists and we must do so with diligence. Several efforts that have been rigorously evaluated provide a wealth of information about what works and what is needed. For example:

- An extensive study of **Job Corps**, which serves more than 60,000 youth annually, indicated that it improves outcomes for participants and is cost effective. Participants commit fewer crimes and earn more income than similar youth who do not participate. While Job Corps costs approximately \$14,000 per participant, its benefits are estimated to total \$31,000 during each youth’s lifetime (Burghardt et al, 2001).
- The **Quantum Opportunities Program** engaged disadvantaged high school freshmen in intensive after school enrichment combining academics, personal development, community service and financial incentives. Male participants were one-sixth as likely to be convicted of a crime during high school when compared to a control group. Overall, participants showed better graduation rates, higher post-secondary enrollment, lower pregnancy rates and higher levels of community involvement (Hahn et al, 1994).
- An evaluation of **Youth Corps** conducted by Abt Associates found that conservation and youth service corps programs led to positive impacts on participants’ employment and earnings, as well as on a range of outcomes for minority groups, particularly young African American men. At the same time, participants contributed valuable services to their communities (Jastrzab et al, 1997).

Programs like these have existed for a long time and smaller, more experimental innovations abound. Some have been rigorously evaluated, many have not. Building on this combination of historical and cutting-edge capacity, we can do better. Helping vulnerable youth succeed requires new ways to work across systems and settings. We must think broadly about comprehensive, integrated solutions.

At the core of supporting vulnerable youth lies a commitment to transformation. Young people need opportunities to develop positive, sustained relationships with adults who hold them to high expectations. And they need opportunities to participate in meaningful ways in challenging experiences and high-quality instruction and training.

Figure 2: Supporting Vulnerable Youth: Comprehensive, Integrated Approaches



In order for such experiences to occur, basic needs like food, housing and medical care must be given. Attention to the family and community context, including an awareness of young people’s roles and responsibilities, is also critical. And of paramount importance is a commitment to preparing youth for postsecondary opportunities and career options. In addition to high-quality training and instruction, this involves continuous exposure to a range of future options — some easily within the young people’s grasp and others that stretch their expectations — must be provided, with specific transitional support, advocacy and encouragement every step of the way.

Continued attention to improving the reach and quality of programs and initiatives on the ground that support the educational and career development of vulnerable youth must be coupled with a commitment to the alignment of relevant systems and policies as well as an effort to increase public will in support of

The Edwin Gould Academy

An example of a program committed to a comprehensive, integrated approach is the Edwin Gould Academy. For too many children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, residential care and education are considered two distinct needs and, consequently, service delivery takes place under two completely separate structures. Edwin Gould is one of very few institutions to integrate a public school district and a residential treatment center into one program with one mission, one strategic plan and one person in the dual role of district superintendent and residential agency director.

Each year approximately 170 youth ages 12–20 call the Academy home. These are youth at greatest risk in the foster system — for whom the next level of care would likely be psychiatric placement or prison.

Based on the premise that high-risk youth can learn and excel in a seamless, consistent environment, the Academy offers a full range of academic, vocational, athletic, artistic, health, community service and counseling experiences to ensure students develop the skills they need to succeed in school and adulthood.

Two key Academy strategies include **Positive Peer Culture** (an emphasis on helping youth demand consistent positive behavior of themselves and their peers); and **Team Primacy** (interdisciplinary staff teams assess each individual student's progress and make decisions concerning all aspects of their work).

— www.edwingouldacademy.org

vulnerable youth. Any discussion of “solutions” should take into account these three challenges:

- **Aligning systems to ensure education and career preparation.**

High-quality academic preparation must be aligned with ongoing supports that take into account the various strengths and challenges youth face on a daily basis.

- **Innovations at the policy level.**

For long-term change to take effect, policies must be better aligned, reflecting a shift from patchwork programs and systems to continuity and connection.

- **Changing perceptions and building public will.**

Programs and policies are critical, but bringing effective comprehensive strategies to scale will require increased public and political will on behalf of vulnerable youth.

Aligning Systems to Ensure Education and Career Preparation

All students can learn⁷ is a powerful affirmative statement, especially when written into public documents. But in and of itself, it is not enough to ensure that all young people have equal opportunities to learn.

- All students should have access to high-quality instruction, regardless of neighborhood, ability level, or institutional status.
- All students, along with their families should have the right to due process.
- All students should have the right to complete their educations, regardless of the reason for their leaving, and to access funds allocated by the state for their education.
- All students and their families should have access to an educational setting and focus that meets their needs.
- All students have the right to ask for and receive support in addressing challenges that might limit their educations.
- All students should have access to integrated work opportunities that allow them to apply what they have learned.
- All students have families and social networks that, if engaged, can help support their learning.
- All students should have real opportunities to pursue postsecondary education and training.

Practically, these statements suggest the need to reverse a powerful set of push-pull forces that have built up over the years. Each day vulnerable young people are essentially being pushed out of school and pulled into the juvenile justice and welfare systems (or pulled into these systems and therefore effectively pulled out of

Transformational Education

Alternative educators from around the country gathered in May 2001 for the Transformational Education Conference. The LA Conservation Corps hosted professionals from settings considered national examples of best practice in serving out-of-school youth. While they work in a range of settings, these professionals share the belief that **all young people can succeed if given a chance**. The group is committed to the notion that community-based alternative schools and educational programs are valuable resources to consider as part of the national undertaking to reinvent high schools. The Transformational Education group is in the process of developing guiding principles; the preliminary list includes:

- Commitment to working effectively and intensively with young people most in need;
- Access to community resources and services that support student learning and provide for diverse educational experiences in school and in the broader community;
- Familiarity with community's young people and families, and experience working with them on personal and community issues;
- High scholastic expectations, regardless of students' past performance, but respectful and flexible according to needs;
- Learning opportunities for students that are challenging and rewarding;
- Curricula and lesson plans that are personalized and flexible;
- Contributions in organizational design and information dissemination from students/ participants are encouraged.

— www.transformationaleducation.org
(launching 1/1/02)

⁷ From the Goals 2000 statement of the Educate America Act, 1994.

school). They are later pushed out of those systems, with few if any positive pulls in place to draw them back into school, the labor force, or any learning or training setting. These dynamics are compounded by the fact that even when in school, these young people often fall farther behind for every year they remain.

These forces need to be reversed; experience shows us they can be. Our primary goal should be to keep young people in the primary public education system. Coupled with that should be a commitment to reducing the learning gaps of low achieving students while they are there. And, if they leave the system — voluntarily or involuntarily — there should be clear educational plans and standards in place that ensure that their learning needs are addressed.

What follows are examples of effective strategies for meeting each of these goals.

UPS School-to-Career Partnership

The United Parcel Service (UPS) School-to-Career Partnership is a community-based initiative in Baltimore designed to engage young adults in the foster care system (and from other disadvantaged populations) in a work and learning experience that expands their opportunities for career and academic success.

Designed to meet the needs of both the employer and young participants, the partnership offers much more than job training. From the outset, the partnership emphasizes the importance of long-term relationships (through intensive case management) as a key strategy for transforming youth into independent adults. Other program components include high expectations and a focus on academic support and personal development.

Everyone Benefits

- During the year 2000, the turnover rate among young adults participating in the Partnership program was 42.9 percent compared to a general UPS turnover rate of 66.9 percent.
- The average length of stay for Partnership program hires was 21.5 weeks, as compared to just 18.1 weeks among the general UPS employee population.

Helping School Systems Support Vulnerable Youth

Vulnerable youth can succeed within the mainstream educational system when the necessary supports are in place. Broad systems reform conversations should include consideration of how to better meet the needs of and improve outcomes for vulnerable youth. Meaningful connections between school systems and public and private agencies equipped to meet a broad range of needs are a key step in increasing the odds that youth undergoing difficult transitions remain in school.

A critical ingredient of high-performing, high-poverty schools is a school culture in which teachers, administrators and systems are committed to the success of each and every student. An environment of “no excuses instruction,” where educators accept neither poverty, nor race, nor a young person’s attitude toward learning as reasons for not engaging them, is critical to our success in transforming high schools to meet the needs of vulnerable youth.

Significant investments are now being made in high school reform, many of them from foundations. While we have yet to see significant changes in student achievement, we are moving in the right direction in leveling the playing field. Across the board, we are seeing high school models that

successfully create environments where, without undermining the quality of education provided, vulnerable youth feel a sense of belonging and are valued. A growing array of initiatives works alongside or within traditional public school settings to provide additional supports to vulnerable youth with the specific goal of improving academic outcomes.

- **Small Schools.** Research consistently suggests that small schools benefit low-income and minority students. Small school size is related to positive outcomes in retention, attendance, violence, parent involvement and suspension (Fine & Somerville, 1998). Small schools create a sense of belonging and high expectations for academic work and promote mastery of skills and subjects by enabling student-centered and inquiry-based learning. Based on small school research, a related trend involves large high schools in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston breaking into smaller communities.
- **Career Academies.** Career Academies have existed for more than 30 years. With the advent of the School to Work Opportunities Act and the trend towards small schools, the academy model is proliferating rapidly. Through collaborative efforts with local employers, academies combine career-related and academic coursework in order to enhance both the relevance and the rigor of the high school experience. Research has demonstrated that career academies, like other small schools, can reduce dropout rates and improve student engagement, especially for low-income and minority students (Kemple & Snipes, 2000). Despite the emphasis on preparing young people for the workplace, career academics are also effective pathways to college.
- **Talent Development High Schools.** This model was developed by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk to respond to the needs of low-performing, large urban high schools that are beset with significant attendance, discipline, achievement and drop-out challenges. The approach builds on the career academy model and includes specific changes in school organization and management.

The Metropolitan Career and Technical Center

The Met, an innovative high school in Providence, RI, has made the commitment to work with students and families after they graduate. As the co-director passed out alumni cards to each student at graduation, he coined the phrase, “once a Met student, always a Met student.” The school is committed to being there for alumni whenever they need support, anticipating that some may need even more from the school during their first year at college (most graduates are the first in their families to go to college) than they did during their senior year.

The school implements specific strategies to support alumni. The following are just a few of the programs and processes in place:

- “Empty Nest” clubs for parents of alumni who have gone to college to share both difficulties and highlights.
- Alumni reunions and events — including inviting alumni to participate in subsequent graduation ceremonies to support the next class, and to talk with juniors about their experiences.
- A “college transition coordinator” who stays in contact and works with alumni and coordinates alumni events.
- Longitudinal research on the impact of the school on alumni allows the Met to use students’ experiences, progress and difficulties to inform all programs.

Educational Options for Out-of-School Youth

Dropping out of school is a process, not an isolated event. Effective programs for educating youth who have left school take this complexity into account and provide a range of services to meet their educational needs. It is incumbent upon advocates, practitioners, policy makers and funders of alternative programs to be vigilant in ensuring that such programs address the unique needs of vulnerable youth and maintain high academic expectations for their students. Innovation is taking place at the program and policy level, but further attention is needed.

- **Linkages to Education.** This program provides comprehensive services that connect youth leaving the juvenile justice system in Sacramento, CA to local community colleges. While incarcerated, youth are offered educational assessment and planning services. Once released, the program helps them complete their GED, assists them in filling out college and financial aid applications and offers ongoing mentoring and support after they have enrolled in community colleges.
- **The Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development (CFWD)** provides young, low-income fathers and families with a range of services. In addition to helping them obtain their GED, CFWD helps clients find employment and improve their parenting skills. In addition, they conduct local, state and national public policy advocacy that advances concerns of young fathers and their families.

Twilight Schools: A Second Chance for Out-of-School Youth in Philadelphia

At 18 sites across Philadelphia, Twilight Schools offer out-of-school youth the opportunity to finish school and graduate in a program that combines classroom instruction with work-based learning and service-learning experiences in the community.

Part of Philadelphia's youth workforce development system, Twilight Schools began in 1997 and reflects a partnership between the Philadelphia School District, the PA Department of Education, and a range of local employers and social service agencies. Financial support comes from a web of public and private sources.

In response to the fact that its students were not successful in traditional school settings, the Twilight program reflects several structural and curricular innovations. An accelerated schedule based on quarters rather than semesters and more flexible daily hours accommodates the family and work obligations of students. The curriculum is infused with opportunities to develop "real-world employment skills" through partnerships with local employers that involve hands-on training and an opportunity to earn wages.

Since 1997, more than 1,100 students have graduated from Twilight and hold high school diplomas; more than 3,500 students have earned some academic credit.

- **Diploma Plus**, a comprehensive educational program developed by the Corporation for Business, Work and Learning in Boston demonstrates that highly disadvantaged young people who have left school or are at-risk of dropping out respond positively to high expectations and comprehensive supports. Diploma Plus sites report that over 60 percent of 1999 graduates are now enrolled in postsecondary programs. www.commcorp.org/CYDE
- **YouthBuild** is one of many “second chance” programs that develops the academic and leadership capacity of young adults who have left school. YouthBuild focuses on the construction trades; participants build job skills through engaging in neighborhood rehabilitation while obtaining their GED or diploma. Programs are currently operating at 145 sites in 43 states. www.youthbuild.org
- **CBO Schools**. Public schools operated in conjunction with community-based organizations, such as the American Indian Opportunities Industrialization Center Career Immersion High School in Minneapolis, have integrated positive youth development principles with effective educational practices to help all students achieve and to empower students to take on active roles in their communities. CBO schools adapt both curriculum and school structure to reflect their belief that youth need relationships with and high expectation from positive adults. www.aed.org/us/cyd

All of these efforts have something in common — they provide additional, targeted supports for vulnerable young people whose support networks are weak to nonexistent. They expend serious energy and resources identifying strengths, meeting young people’s broader needs and helping them develop and grow in other areas. Committed to transformation, they respond to the developmental imperative by paying attention to the full content of “the Cube.” Youth development principles are the very foundation of their pedagogy.

Identifying High Quality Alternative Education Programs

Alternative education encompasses a wide range of programming that occurs in a wide range of settings. While some programs exemplify effective instructional practices and high quality services and supports, on the other end of the spectrum are programs that do little more than serve as holding pens for young people who don’t fit within the traditional school system.

The National Youth Employment Coalition has been working with a group of educators, practitioners, researchers, foundations and policy makers to develop a self-assessment tool for community-based and alternative education programs that builds on PEPNet (Promising and Effective Practice Network). Criteria clusters to be assessed include: curriculum; instruction; transition; faculty and staff; learning climate/structure; essential supports, opportunities and services; and purpose, organization and management. Each criterion is defined and illustrated with specific indicators that allow programs to self-assess.

The “transition” criteria specifically assess how well programs prepare students for and connect them to appropriate next steps such as traditional high school, post-secondary education and training and employment; acknowledging that supporting students through key transitions should be considered a major focus of alternative schools.

— www.nyec.org

Innovations at the Policy Level

Innovations at the program level and efforts to reform systems are critical, but for meaningful long-term change to be sustained, they must be supported by innovation at the policy level. While the U.S. does not have a comprehensive set of policies that support the transition from youth to adulthood, a number of individual policies exist at the federal, state and local levels that provide additional support to vulnerable youth in transition. Policy innovations of interest tend to:

- focus on development not deficits;
- link systems and sectors;
- address disparities;
- extend supports; and
- increase educational expectations.

State Policies that Help Foster Care Youth Go to College

While most states have no such legislation in place, policies are being developed under the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to help foster youth obtain a college education:

- **California** State University, in partnership with the county, offers the Guardian Scholars program, providing tuition, books, housing and faculty mentors.
- With the state department of child welfare, **Texas A & M** University offers a scholarship to help pay room and board for foster care youth. Students are also paired with a faculty mentor and sponsor family.
- The **Massachusetts** Department of Social Services offers state college tuition waivers for foster care youth.
- A **Connecticut** policy enables the Department of Children and Family Services to pay educational expenses — books, health care and room and board — for foster youth attending college.
 - In 2001, the **Oregon** state legislature passed a foster care scholarship bill and a legislative appropriation.

— www.connectforkids.org/content1552/content.htm

Policy that Focuses on Development, Not Deficits

The Youth Opportunity Movement managed by the Department of Labor Office of Youth Services promotes the integration of youth development into the youth employment system. Youth Opportunity initiatives are integrating mentoring, career development, youth leadership, arts, academic tutoring, mental health services, case management and advocacy into employment and training strategies. By investing resources for comprehensive services in high-poverty areas, Youth Opportunity initiatives aim to improve employment, school completion and college enrollment rates.

Policy that Links Systems and Sectors

The Youth Offenders Initiative is a collaborative effort between the departments of Justice, Labor and Health and Human Services that supports the development and implementation of re-entry programs for young offenders ages 14 to 24. The program is based on the assumption that reintegrating young offenders into the community such that they can become productive, law-abiding citizens involves helping them complete their education, find and retain long-term

employment, find and maintain a stable residence and successfully address substance abuse and mental health needs.

Policy that Addresses Disparities

The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills

(TAAS) is an example of how policy makers can begin to take responsibility for ensuring that policy is implemented effectively for all youth. TAAS is a battery of state tests given every spring to students in grades three, eight and ten. Schools are evaluated both on the percentage of students passing the TAAS and on the percentage of low-income and minority students passing. Texas has shown success at raising average scores and closing the achievement gap at least in the lower grades. Concerns with the implementation of TAAS remain, however, especially the use of high stakes tests as the primary measurement for high school graduation.

The Workforce Investment Act

The Workforce Investment Act introduced several policy shifts based on the principles of development and transition. The new consolidated youth program incorporates youth development activities with traditional workforce development. The Act emphasizes preparation for postsecondary educational opportunities; strong linkages between academic and occupational learning; preparation for unsubsidized employment opportunities; and effective connections to intermediaries with strong links to the job market and local and regional employers. Funded programs must provide support and referral services for youth, with follow-up services available for at least 12 months.

Policy that Extend Services and Supports

The John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program of 1999 doubled the amount of funding available to states interested in expanding services for youth who age out of the foster care system. Funds can be used to offer independent living support, health care, employment training, prevention and post-secondary education support to youth who have aged out of the foster care system. For example, the state legislature in Arizona recently passed legislation ensuring that foster youth in care at age 18 have access to Medicaid up to age 21, regardless of income.

Policy that Increases Educational Expectations

Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) policies recognize the importance of education by including policies that expect teen parents to complete high school. In addition to providing programs that help teens stay in school, including day care services, income supports and reproductive health services, several states such as Maine, Illinois and Kentucky have taken this expectation one step further by creating opportunities for welfare recipients, including teen parents, to attend college full-time without being penalized.

Changing Perceptions and Building Public Will

Effective programs and policies exist, and documentation and evaluation efforts are improving. However in order to bring such strategies to scale, it is critical that we build public will on behalf of vulnerable youth. To have a powerful long-term impact, efforts to reform systems and strengthen community supports to better meet the needs of vulnerable youth must be accompanied by efforts to reframe perceptions — perceptions about youth themselves and their futures.

Willingness to invest private and public dollars in a broad definition of development narrows significantly as children get older. Investments in young people's cognitive development are sustained, but public investments in other growth areas (e.g., civic, physical, social, vocational) are significantly lower and tend to be made only after problems begin to occur.

Consider the language:

- **Early childhood:** care, education, early intervention, development.
- **Elementary school:** education, after-school education, remediation, supervision.
- **Middle school:** education, remediation, prevention.
- **High school:** education, remediation, prevention, redirection, crisis intervention, rehabilitation.
- **Out-of-school:** remediation, second chance programs, treatment, employment training, after care.

Challenge 1: Uneven Distribution of Public and Political Will

There is strong public and political will for investing in the development of young children. The Bush Administration's Leave No Child Behind agenda focuses largely on children grades K–8. But perceptions of the need for investments in older youth are more limited and tend to focus on education, prevention and punishment.

While we are far from having adequate funds to support Head Start and other public programs and policies designed to help families with young children, there is a strong sentiment that these are precious developmental years that must be used well. Early childhood research has been used persuasively to cement the idea among parents, policy makers and the general public that these are years in which children not only need to be supervised, but carefully nurtured physically, socially, cognitively and emotionally.

In addition to the question of age and investment, there is a sense in this country that some people and some families are more deserving than others. Every child born in America is promised an education. And policy makers and the public are, in principle, committed to helping ensure that children have the other essential supports they need to succeed (e.g., health care, child care, after school programs).

There is a strong sense, however, that these supports should go to children and families who deserve them. Prevention programs were sold in the mid-1990s, in part because they were helping keep the good kids from falling in with the bad ones. There is a public threshold after which willingness to pay for prevention programs drops off and resurfaces as a willingness to pay for punishment.

Policy makers and the public remain skeptical that there are effective ways to help troubled young people turn their lives around. And even if they accept that solutions exist, many believe that responsibility should not extend beyond parents to the public realm. “Adults default to a parental responsibility frame at every opportunity. It is very difficult to shift people from parental to societal responsibility (Bostrom, 2000).”

Challenge 2: Biases and Blinders

Skepticism about effective solutions is linked to deeply held biases against young people, particularly young males of color. In focus groups with parents, Bales (2001) found an alarming consistency in the way adults discounted positive trends among teens, consistently overlooking or doubting the validity of positive data. Bales concludes that “the absence of an experiential base for some adults, and the power of media images to trump personal experience for others leaves most adults with few alternatives to the images provided by their daily feed of news and entertainment.”

William Julius Wilson (1999) has documented the widely shared perception that young black men are undesirable workers and the fact that discrimination has contributed to their persistent exclusion from higher paying jobs. For example, a suburban drug store owner interviewed as part of Wilson’s research stated, “It’s unfortunate but, in my business I think overall [black men] tend to be known to be dishonest . . . They’re known to be lazy . . . Whether they are or not, I don’t know, but, it’s an image that is perceived.”

While racism and diversity are increasingly taken into consideration during program planning, they are more often than not considered contextual rather than central (Henderson, 2001). And, discrimination must be addressed beyond the program level; the fact that young people experience institutional racism within the very systems designed to support them requires a broad reexamination of issues including access, representation and service design and delivery.

Challenge 3: Tension Between Universal and Targeted Strategies

The youth development movement grew during the 1990s, as an effort to reframe goals and services for “at-risk” youth and define good practice. The decade spawned the development of a number of frameworks based on fundamental assertions about the goals, inputs and settings required for positive youth development.

While many organizations that serve vulnerable youth have increasingly adopted and promoted the youth development approach, the term is still closely connected with a call for more community-based programs and activities — programs generally designed to serve all youth in a community.

“We are always surprised when we find disparity in outcomes in our programs. Yet we know that young people confront racism in schools, the workplace, and in college. Direct service providers continue to struggle with how to enter into productive dialogue with young people about discrimination and how to structure programs to enable young people to more effectively navigate, address, and challenge racism within the systems that they operate. ”

— David Brown
National Youth Employment Coalition

This is in large part because the youth development pitch is universal — the goals and principles are argued as relevant for all youth, not just those who are doing well, or doing well but needing an extra boost. But it is also because proponents (the authors included) have often not been explicit enough about how to work with young people who have serious problems and deficits (practice lags behind rhetoric), or forthcoming enough about the fact that all programs are not necessarily willing or prepared to work with the most vulnerable youth.

The shift from a deficit to an asset approach and challenges to labeling youth as “at-risk” brought with them a tendency for policy makers and foundations to de-emphasize strategies targeting particular populations (Hahn, forthcoming). However, in the context of limited resources, equity and prioritization must be addressed and approaches aiming to shift the systems serving vulnerable youth must be taken into consideration.

While strong elements of the youth development message have been incorporated into foster care, juvenile justice and youth employment over the past decade (Brown et al, 2001; Mendel, 2000), engaging these and other public systems represents a critical opportunity and necessary next step for the youth development field. They represent vast numbers of young people and resources, and as “closed” systems they present a unique opportunity for strategies to be tested and evaluated and for young people to be accounted for and followed over time.

“Many folks working on the margins with vulnerable young adults have resisted in part because they are concerned that youth development strategies may not reach the young people they serve. The youth development field has an opportunity to tailor resources and partner with people working in public systems to develop approaches that build upon the relationship between youth development and the young people they serve.”

— Talmira Hill
Co-founder,
Youth Transition Funders Group

Recommendations for the Work Ahead

Systems as they are currently structured drop many of our children off well before they have reached their final destination. Without significant interventions, millions of young people are getting boxed into a corner. The Youth Transition Funders Group is working to make sure that regardless of the different paths young people take, despite detours to the streets, jail and early parenting, they all arrive at the same place: ready to take advantage of college-level education and training — with the skills they need to participate fully in mainstream institutions, including the workplace, higher education and the political process.

After decades of offering time-restricted, segmented services, we believe we understand what it takes to create the engaging opportunities needed to support young people in their own transformation and the transformation of their lives. Much work lies ahead. We must:

- **Raise the Bar**

If all young people need post-secondary education and training to make a living wage, then we need to make sure that all systems and programs serving vulnerable youth offer educational opportunities capable of taking them from where they are to being college-ready. The academic standards movement is raising the bar in our school systems. But we haven't put into place or funded structures that supplement young people's educational experiences to make sure that they can catch up or not fall behind in the first place. Furthermore, the other systems that touch young people's development — juvenile justice, foster care, welfare, workforce development, community college — should also implement programs and instructional methodolo-

"More than ever before, all young people need high quality secondary education. Yet the structures of high schools that have traditionally sorted students into college prep, vocational and general education, and dropouts remain . . . And more than ever before, the consequences of tracking severely restrict the future lives of young people."

— Michele Cahill,
Carnegie Corporation

gies that effectively accelerate young people’s learning. When you are poor, time is not just about money, it is about survival. We have a ways to go before an educational safety net is in place.

• **Dive Deep Into What We Don’t Know**

Clearly we need more reliable information about the numbers of vulnerable youth and where to find them. In addition we need better advocacy systems for supporting their progress, particularly since many young people are involved with more than one system at any given time. There is also a need for more research and the synthesis and dissemination of existing knowledge related to some of the most challenging teaching and learning issues — how to help young people reading below the 8th grade level develop effective comprehension skills, how to support students with significant learning disabilities, how to use computer aided instruction effectively and how to use the time young people spend incarcerated or in transitional programs to produce the greatest increases in learning.

• **Be Developmental by Design**

We have made significant progress introducing youth development principles into youth-serving programs. Through initiatives like the National Youth Employment Coalition’s PEPNet (Promising and Effective Practices Network) we’ve seen youth development principles begin to be integrated into youth employment policies and programs. And we can point to innovative efforts to integrate youth development principles into education and deep-end systems like juvenile justice, welfare and foster care. But we are far from seeing developmental strategies being fully integrated into policies across these systems. We must critically assess policies that are in place, especially those that operate across systems and rethink or eliminate those that are based on deficit and dead-end principles. And we need to fund transitional services for young people for whom they are not a given.

• **Remember that Race and Class Matter**

We know that they do, yet when we develop policies, replicate programs and develop new interventions, they somehow slip off of the agenda. We know that when we implement universal policies on top of inequitable resources, disparities in outcomes will result. What will it take for us to start addressing race and class in the same systematic fashion that inequities currently operate across our institutions? How can we embed equity into our work rather than allow it to remain an add-on or a separate agenda altogether? We must get better at talking about race and class within the context of universal policies. We must get better at understanding the dynamics of institutional racism. And we must hold ourselves accountable to each other to make sure our own privileges do not act as blinders.

“You see no faces like your own and you begin to believe your face doesn’t belong in these places. So you don’t strive for these places . . . people are placed into certain roles by the institution; or at times place these roles on themselves because they don’t see any other way and have no other model because limits and roles are placed on them because of institutional racism.”

— Puerto Rican Youth, Age 17

• Focus on the Relationships

One of the great challenges before us is to create systems and programs that value and invest in the relationships between young people and adults. Young people say it again and again — the thing that made the difference is someone cared, someone opened their hearts, someone went the distance. In looking at program design, management structures, outcomes and cost-benefit models, we must be vigilant in thinking through how to ensure that relationships remain at the very core of our work. We often refer to young people as disconnected from institutions or hard to reach. It's time we start thinking about how to measure the “stickiness” of institutions — how well they reach out and stay connected with vulnerable youth. As 17-year-old Tito reminds us, “kids can walk around trouble, if there's someplace to walk to and someone to walk with (McLaughlin et al, 1994).”

• Build Public and Political Will

Who is going to bat for vulnerable youth? The stereotypes and fears that many Americans hold about young people of color are barriers, but they are not insurmountable. And, among groups that already care about what happens to vulnerable youth, there remains significant work to be done to build political will. Congregations, especially African American congregations, have long been addressing the issues of education and juvenile justice. Young people themselves are initiating “Books Not Bars” campaigns. And service providers are organizing themselves to move beyond advocacy. But we still need to generate the capital and infrastructure to help these organizing campaigns move beyond isolated, local issues.

The initiatives highlighted in this document and championed by the Youth Transition Funders Group represent just a handful of the innovative efforts underway around the country thanks to individuals and organizations willing to go the extra mile, guiding young people who have lost faith in public institutions and many of the adults in their lives. The results, from anecdotes to evaluations, are impressive.

Strategies to support our most vulnerable young people should not be hit or miss or isolated opportunities offered in a vacuum. If transformational experiences can occur within a fragmented, under-funded system that lacks strong data, consider what could be accomplished if a concerted effort were made to identify the vulnerable youth population, respond to unmet needs within that population, strengthen and take to scale programs designed to serve vulnerable young people and articulate a policy agenda that weaves together what we know about how to support them and their families. Imagine the possibilities. Now let's get to work.



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Powerful Pathways: Framing Options and Opportunities for Vulnerable Youth

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"If you can show me how to cling to that which is real to me, while teaching me a way into the larger society, then I will not only drop my defenses and my hostility, but I will sing your praises and I will help you to make the desert bear fruit."

— Ralph Ellison

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