

# Whatever It Takes

*How Twelve Communities Are  
Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*

**NANCY MARTIN AND SAMUEL HALPERIN**



AMERICAN YOUTH POLICY FORUM

*In Cooperation With*

National Conference of State Legislatures ■ National League of Cities ■ National School Boards Association  
National Association of Secondary School Principals ■ Council of the Great City Schools



## AMERICAN YOUTH POLICY FORUM

### ***Bridging Youth Policy, Practice, and Research***

#### **Mission:**

*To improve opportunities, services, and life prospects for youth, we provide learning experiences for national, state, and local policymakers and practitioners.*

The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), a nonprofit, nonpartisan professional development organization based in Washington, DC, provides learning opportunities for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working on youth and education issues at the national, state, and local levels. AYPF's goal is to enable participants to become more effective in the development, enactment, and implementation of sound policies affecting the nation's young people by providing information, insights, and networks to better understand the development of healthy and successful young people, productive workers, and participating citizens in a democratic society. AYPF does not lobby or advocate for positions on pending legislation. Rather, we believe that greater intellectual and experiential knowledge of youth issues will lead to sounder, more informed policymaking. We strive to generate a climate of constructive action by enhancing communication, understanding, and trust among youth policy professionals.

Founded in 1993, AYPF has interacted with thousands of policymakers by conducting an average of 40 annual events such as lunchtime forums, out-of-town field trips, and foreign study missions. Participants include Congressional staff; federal, state, and local government officials; national nonprofit and advocacy association professionals; and the press corps. At forums, these professionals interact with renowned thinkers, researchers, and practitioners to learn about national and local strategies for formal and informal education, career preparation, and the development of youth as resources through service and skill development activities. Study tour participants visit schools undergoing comprehensive reforms, after-school and community learning sites, and youth employment and training centers, where they learn experientially from the young people and adults in the field.

AYPF focuses on three overlapping themes: Education, Youth Development and Community Involvement, and Preparation for Careers and Workforce Development. AYPF publishes a variety of nationally disseminated youth policy reports and materials. Many of these publications may be found on our website, [www.aypf.org](http://www.aypf.org).

**FUNDERS.** AYPF events and policy reports are made possible by the support of a consortium of philanthropic foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, Ford Motor Company Fund, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, General Electric Fund, William T. Grant Foundation, George Gund Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, KnowledgeWorks Foundation, McKnight Foundation, Charles S. Mott Foundation, Surdna Foundation, and others. The views reflected in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders.

**COPYRIGHT.** American Youth Policy Forum, Washington, DC, 2006. This publication is copyrighted, but may be quoted without permission provided the source is identified as: Martin, N., & Halperin, S. (2006). *Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum. Reproduction of any portion of this report for commercial sale is prohibited. For additional copies of this publication, see back pages, or visit our website, [www.aypf.org](http://www.aypf.org). ISBN # 887031-93-6

# Whatever It Takes

*How Twelve Communities Are  
Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*

**NANCY MARTIN AND SAMUEL HALPERIN**



AMERICAN YOUTH POLICY FORUM

*In Cooperation With*

National Conference of State Legislatures ■ National League of Cities ■ National School Boards Association  
National Association of Secondary School Principals ■ Council of the Great City Schools

# Contents

Acknowledgements .....	v
<b>Every Nine Seconds in America a Student Becomes a Dropout: The Dropout Problem in Numbers</b> .....	vii
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>PART I: COMMUNITY CASE STUDIES</b>	
INTRODUCTION: <b>Dropout Recovery in Twelve Communities</b> .....	7
CHAPTER 1: <b>Montgomery County (Dayton), Ohio</b> .....	11
<i>A county-led recovery effort centered on charter schools for out-of-school youth</i>	
CHAPTER 2: <b>Jefferson County (Louisville), Kentucky</b> .....	23
<i>A large school district with 80 options to retain and graduate its students; advanced use of student data to ensure accountability</i>	
CHAPTER 3: <b>Austin, Texas</b> .....	31
<i>An alternative public high school and community-based organization charter schools providing multiple options for out-of-school youth</i>	
CHAPTER 4: <b>Salt Lake City, Utah</b> .....	41
<i>A public high school that transcends definitions of dropout prevention and recovery and continuing education to serve 9,000 youth and adults annually</i>	
CHAPTER 5: <b>Portland, Oregon</b> .....	47
<i>A school district, community-based-organizations, and a community college working together for at-risk and out-of-school youth; state legislation facilitating dropout reconnection and funding of alternative education</i>	
CHAPTER 6: <b>Oakland, California</b> .....	59
<i>Two veteran, entrepreneurial community-based organizations approaching out-of-school youth with different perspectives</i>	
CHAPTER 7: <b>Trenton, New Jersey</b> .....	69
<i>A nontraditional public high school graduating large numbers of out-of-school youth and young adults</i>	
CHAPTER 8: <b>Baltimore, Maryland</b> .....	73
<i>A mayoral commitment to out-of-school youth leading to partnerships with the private sector and many community-based organizations</i>	
CHAPTER 9: <b>Pima County (Tucson), Arizona</b> .....	89
<i>Arts and horticulture employment training programs and a county-wide public campaign to support dropout recovery</i>	
CHAPTER 10: <b>Camden, New Jersey</b> .....	101
<i>An education and job-readiness youth service and conservation corps with a strong emphasis on youth development</i>	

## Contents *(continued)*

CHAPTER 11: <b>Milwaukee, Wisconsin</b> .....	107
<i>Pioneer state legislation and school board innovation offering multiple educational options for at-risk and out-of-school youth</i>	
CHAPTER 12: <b>Philadelphia, Pennsylvania</b> .....	113
<i>Mayoral and school district leadership supporting city-wide youth service planning and funding mechanisms for community-based organizations; innovation in juvenile justice reintegration</i>	
 <b>PART II: MAJOR NATIONAL PROGRAMS</b>	
<b>Introduction to Major National Programs</b> .....	135
CHAPTER 13: <b>Job Corps</b> .....	137
CHAPTER 14: <b>Jobs for America’s Graduates</b> .....	141
CHAPTER 15: <b>National Guard Youth ChalleNGe</b> .....	145
CHAPTER 16: <b>Opportunities Industrialization Centers</b> .....	147
CHAPTER 17: <b>YouthBuild</b> .....	149
CHAPTER 18: <b>Youth Service and Conservation Corps</b> .....	153
CHAPTER 19: <b>Youth Opportunity Grant Program</b> .....	157
 <b>Recommendations: Building on Strength</b> .....	163
Additional Resources.....	167
Glossary.....	169
About the Authors .....	173
American Youth Policy Forum Publications List .....	175
Publications Order Form .....	181

# Every Nine Seconds in America a Student Becomes a Dropout

## *The Dropout Problem in Numbers\**

### **Millions of students leave school before high school graduation.**

- In School Year 2002-2003, US public schools awarded 2.7 million diplomas and the National Center for Education Statistics calculated the graduation rate to be 73.9%. Graduation rates varied greatly by state, from 87% in New Jersey to under 60% in the District of Columbia and South Carolina. Thirty-nine states increased their graduation rates from 2001 to 2003 while most southern states, plus Alaska, the District of Columbia, and New York, experienced declines.<sup>1</sup> Other authoritative research found the 2002 graduation rate to be 71%, little changed from 1991's 72%.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2004, there were 27,819,000 18-24-year-olds in the United States. Of these, 21,542,000 (78%) had either graduated from high school, earned a GED, completed some college, or earned an associate's or bachelor's degree. The balance, 6,277,000 (22%), had not yet completed high school.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars exclude GED holders, resulting in a much higher noncompletion figure. Similarly, if researchers count the adult population over age 24, the high school noncompletion rate would be higher still.<sup>4</sup>
- An estimated 3.8 million youth ages 18-24 are neither employed nor in school—15% of all young adults. From 2000 to 2004, the ranks of these disconnected young adults grew by 700,000.<sup>5</sup>
- From 1990 to 2000, high school completion rates declined in all but seven states and the rate of students dropping out between 9th and 10th grades increased.<sup>6</sup>

### **Members of some demographic groups are at much greater risk of dropping out of school.**

- Nationally, only about two-thirds of all students who enter 9th grade graduate with regular high school diplomas four years later. For minority males, these figures are far lower.<sup>7</sup> In 2001, on average, 72% of female students, but only 64% of male students graduated. African American students had a graduation rate of 50%, the lowest of racial and ethnic groups identified; the other student groups graduated at the following rates: American Indian, 51%; Latino, 53%; White, 75%; and Asian and Pacific Islander, 77%. But there were enormous disparities among state graduation levels, and even larger disparities by ethnicity and gender within the same states.<sup>8</sup>
- In SY 2000-2001, high school students from low-income families (the lowest 20%) dropped out of school at six times the rate of their peers from higher-income families.<sup>9</sup>
- In SY 2000-2001, only 47.6% of persons with disabilities ages 14 and older graduated with standard diplomas while 41.1% dropped out.<sup>10</sup>

### **When young people drop out of school, they—and American society at large—face multiple negative consequences.**

- Of those who fail to graduate with their peers, one-quarter eventually earn a diploma, one-quarter earn the GED, and about one-half do not earn a high school credential.<sup>11</sup>

\* There is no generally-accepted definition of a dropout. Some use school enrollment figures; others rely on US Census population surveys. Some include GED recipients; others do not. Some keep records of transfer students; many do not.



- Three-quarters of state prison inmates are dropouts, as are 59% of federal inmates.<sup>12</sup> In fact, dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be incarcerated in their lifetime.<sup>13</sup> African American men are disproportionately incarcerated. Of all African American male dropouts in their early 30s, 52% have been imprisoned.<sup>14</sup> 90% of the 11,000 youth in adult detention facilities have no more than a 9th grade education.<sup>15</sup>
- The earning power of dropouts has been in almost continuous decline over the past three decades. In 1971, male dropouts earned \$35,087 (in 2002 dollars), but this fell 35% to \$23,903 in 2002. Earnings for female dropouts fell from \$19,888 to \$17,114.<sup>16</sup> The mean earnings of Latino young adults who finish high school are 43% higher than those who dropout.<sup>17</sup>
- The earnings gap widens with years of schooling and formal training. In 2003, annual earnings of male dropouts fell to \$21,447. High school graduates earned an average of \$32,266; those with associate's degrees earned \$43,462; bachelor's degree holders earned \$63,084—about triple that of dropouts.<sup>18</sup>
- In 2001, only 55% of young adult dropouts were employed, compared with 74% of high school graduates and 87% of four-year college graduates.<sup>19</sup>
- Between 1997 and 2001, more than one-quarter of all dropouts were unemployed for one year or longer, compared with 11% of those with a high school diploma or GED.<sup>20</sup> In 2003, more than one-half of African American young adult male dropouts in Chicago were unemployed.<sup>21</sup>
- The US death rate for persons with fewer than 12 years of education is 2.5 times higher than for those with 13 or more years of education.<sup>22</sup>
- Dropouts are substantially more likely to rely on public assistance than those with a high school diploma.<sup>23</sup> The estimated lifetime revenue loss for male dropouts ages 25-34 is \$944 billion. The cost to the public of their crime and welfare benefits is estimated to total \$24 billion annually.<sup>24</sup>
- Dropouts contribute to state and federal tax coffers at only about one-half the rate of high school graduates; over a working lifetime about \$60,000 less, or \$50 billion annually for the 23 million high school non-completers, ages 18-67.<sup>25</sup>
- The US would save \$41.8 billion in health care costs if the 600,000 young people who dropped out in 2004 were to complete one additional year of education. If only one-third of high school dropouts were to earn a high school diploma, federal savings in reduced costs for food stamps, housing assistance, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families would amount to \$10.8 billion annually.<sup>26</sup>
- Increasing the high school completion rate by 1% for all men ages 20-60 would save the United States \$1.4 billion annually in reduced costs associated with crime.<sup>27</sup>
- Federal investments in second-chance education and training programs fell from \$15 billion in the late 1970s to \$3 billion (inflation-adjusted) today.<sup>28</sup>
- Dropouts “cost our nation more than \$260 billion dollars...That’s in lost wages, lost taxes, and lost productivity over their lifetimes. In federal dollars, that will buy you ten years of research at the National Institutes of Health.”<sup>29</sup>
- The statistic bears repeating: every nine seconds in America a student becomes a dropout.<sup>30</sup>

## Sources

- 1 Seastrom, M., et al. (2005). *The averaged freshman graduation rate for public high schools from the Common Core of Data: School years 2001-03*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.
- 2 Greene, J.P., & Winters M.A. (2005, February), p. 1.
- 3 National Center for Education Statistics. (2004). *Digest of education statistics 2004*. Washington, DC, Table 9; Greene, J.P., & Winters, M.A. (2005, February). "Public high school graduation and college readiness rates: 1991-2002." *Education Working Paper No. 8*. New York, NY: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.
- 4 Hood, L. (2004). *High school students at risk: The challenge of dropouts and pushouts*. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York; US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *The condition of education 2005*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, pp. 55-57; Reimer, M., & Smink, J. (2005). *Information about the school dropout issue*. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University.
- 5 Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2004). *Kids count data book*. Baltimore, MD: Author.
- 6 Barton, P. E. (2005). *One-third of a nation: Rising dropout rates and declining opportunities*. Princeton, NJ: Policy Information Center, Educational Testing Service, p. 3.
- 7 Orfield, G. (Ed.). (2004). *Dropouts in America: confronting the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, p. 1. See also: Swanson, C.B. (2004). *Who graduates? Who doesn't? A statistical portrait of public high-school graduation*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- 8 Orfield, G., Losen, D.J., Wald, J., & Swanson, C. B. (2004). *Losing our future: How minority youth are being left behind by the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. See also: Losen, D.J. (2005, December). *Racial inequity in graduation rates*. Research presented during Connect for Kids and National Education Association conference call on the Dropout Crisis. Greene, J.P., & Winters, M.A. (2005, February) find the African American graduation rate in 2002 to be 56%, Latinos 52%, and Whites 78%.
- 9 US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2004). *The condition of education 2004*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, Indicator 10, p. 11.
- 10 US Department of Education. (2003). *Twenty-fifth annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Washington, DC.
- 11 Alliance for Excellent Education. (2004). *A framework for an excellent education for all high school students*. Washington, DC: Author.
- 12 Harlow, C.W. (2003). *Education and correctional populations, bureau of justice statistics special report*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice.
- 13 Catterall, J.S. (1985). *On the social cost of dropping out*. Stanford, CA: Center for Education Research, cited in Alliance for Excellent Education. (2004, December). *Measuring graduation to measure success*. Washington, DC: Author.
- 14 Western, B., Schiraldi, V., & Zienberg, J. (2004). *Education and incarceration*. Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, p. 1.
- 15 Coalition for Juvenile Justice. (2001). *From the prison track to the college track*. Washington, DC: Author.
- 16 Barton, P.E. (2005), p. 5.
- 17 US Bureau of the Census. (2002). *Educational attainment in the United States*. Washington, DC, Table 9.
- 18 Center on Education Policy and American Youth Policy Forum. (2001). *Higher learning = higher earnings*. Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy and American Youth Policy Forum.
- 19 Sum, Andrew et al. (2002). *Left behind in the labor market: labor market problems of the nation's out-of-school, young adult populations*. Chicago, IL: Alternative Schools Network. Retrieved December 27, 2005 from [http://www.nupr.neu.edu/2-03/left\\_behind.pdf](http://www.nupr.neu.edu/2-03/left_behind.pdf)
- 20 Wald, M., & Martinez, T. (2003). Connected by 25: Improving life chances of the country's most vulnerable 14-24-year-olds. *William and Flora Hewlett Foundation Working Paper*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. Retrieved December 27, 2005 from [www.youthtransitions.org](http://www.youthtransitions.org)
- 21 Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University. (2003). *Youth labor market and education indicators for the state of Illinois*. Chicago, IL: Alternative Schools Network.
- 22 Alliance for Excellent Education. (2003). *Fact sheet: The impact of education on health and well-being*. Washington, DC: Author.
- 23 Adair, V.C. (2001). Poverty and the (broken) promise of education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 71(2), pp. 217-239.
- 24 Thorstensen, B. I. *If you build it, they will come: Investing in public education*. Retrieved December 27, 2005 from [http://abec.unm.edu/resources/gallery/present/invest\\_in\\_ed.pdf](http://abec.unm.edu/resources/gallery/present/invest_in_ed.pdf)
- 25 Rouse, C.E. (2005, October). *The labor market consequences of an inadequate education*. Paper presented at the symposium on the social costs of inadequate education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY. Retrieved December 27, 2005 from <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/centers/EquityCampaign/symposium/speakers.asp?SpeakerId=11>
- 26 Muenning, P. (2005, October). *Health returns to education interventions*. Paper presented at the symposium on the social costs of inadequate education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY. Retrieved December 27, 2005 from <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/centers/EquityCampaign/symposium/resourceDetails.asp?PresId=5>
- 27 Moretti, E. (2005, October). *Does education reduce participation in criminal activities?* Paper presented at the symposium on the social costs of inadequate education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY. Retrieved December 27, 2005 from <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/centers/EquityCampaign/symposium/speakers.asp?SpeakerId=9>
- 28 Barton, P.E. (2005), p. 4.
- 29 *Closing the achievement gap in American schools: The No Child Left Behind Act: Hearing before the Committee on Education and the Workforce, House of Representatives*, 109th Cong. (2005, September 29) (testimony of Margaret Spellings). Retrieved December 27, 2005 from (<http://edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/109th/fc/spellingsnclb092905/spellings.htm>)
- 30 Lehr, C.A. et al. (2004). *Essential tools: Increasing rates of school completion*. Minneapolis, MN: National Center on Secondary Education and Transition. (Full text available online from Education Commission of the States at: <http://www.ecs.org/html/Document.asp?chouseid=6649>)



# Introduction

Conventional wisdom holds that America's enormous school dropout problem is a scourge on the nation's moral, social, and economic life, and a blight on our common national future. That conventional wisdom is right. As a reminder of the shameful facts, the preceding pages summarize the magnitude of the dropout problem, its disproportionate impact on particular communities, and its corrosive consequences for all Americans, not merely the dropouts. The problem must no longer be ignored or treated lightly.

**Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth** is not, however, a mournful jeremiad repeating the sad facts. Nor does it recycle what the popular media trumpet about the supposed failure of our public schools as symbolized, for example, by the shocking enormity of the dropout problem. Rather, this report explores two questions:



*What can be done to recover and reconnect our young people to opportunities for building useful lives in work, family, and citizenship?*



*Who is doing what, and where, to reengage out-of-school youth while working to strengthen the communities in which they live?*

Focusing on the positive, the American Youth Policy Forum's research, interviews, and site visits demonstrate that there are thousands of committed educators, social entrepreneurs, and community leaders across the country who are doing whatever it takes to reconnect out-of-school youth to the social and economic mainstream. Their efforts generally occur without public fanfare or adequate recognition.

Any sensible school reform effort must embrace both dropout prevention and recovery. **Whatever It Takes** does not focus on prevention but recognizes its obvious importance. With roughly one-third of our young people dropping out of school—one-half among young people of color—recovery and recon-

nection must become a top priority of public school districts. Through our research, we have come to believe strongly that high school reform would be greatly enhanced by the kinds of leadership and innovation displayed daily by the people whose work is chronicled in these pages. Many are extraordinary individuals who persistently perform the heavy lifting necessary to ensure that out-of-school youth are properly reconnected to society's mainstream.

## Observations and Reflections

The settings and modes of dropout recovery are many and varied. They encompass traditional public schools, specially-created recovery-focused schools, alternative learning centers, community-based non-profit schools and programs, for-profit schools, federally-, state-, and county-funded efforts, community colleges, the adult education system, and other social services. It is heartening that such diverse people, resources, and institutions recognize the urgency of steering their communities' out-of-school youth back into education and/or employment training so that they can build lives of genuine high promise and responsibility. Unfortunately, in many communities the work of recovery and reconnection has yet to begin in earnest.

Our descriptions and impressions of this sample of a dozen communities with notable reclamation endeavors are stories of success rather than products of rigorous scientific analysis. While each community can point to measurable evidence of success, few of these measures would meet the gold standard of today's evidence-based research. If fully reliable, comprehensive evaluations of K-12 schooling are few, those relating to out-of-school youth are even rarer. "Stories" better captures the essence of what we have seen and wish to share with others: young lives changing from poverty and despair to possibility and promise; institutions effectively reshaping themselves to meet the learning needs of young people who seldom have been the object of society's attention and compassion.

Having studied numerous dropout recovery efforts in-depth, we offer these observations to those concerned with high school reform and reconnecting out-of-school youth to opportunities for education and employment:

***The large majority of out-of-school youth have been impeded not only by poor prior schooling, but also by social, economic, and psychological barriers to effective learning. To become successful adults they need multiple supports.*** Improved schooling alone will not “fix” these young people or solve their manifold problems, not the least of which are often inherently personal traumas. At a minimum, these typically low-income and often troubled students must have ready access to support services in such vital areas as health, nutrition, teen parenting, childcare, transportation, substance abuse treatment, mental health, and instruction in English as a second language. Without these supports, and in some cases even more specialized professional resources, prospects for genuine academic achievement and successful career-focused training can dissolve into pipe dreams.

***Beyond question, youth must acquire literacy, numeracy, and communication skills to be adequately prepared for adult life.*** Students in the vast majority of the schools and programs described in this report are being prepared to meet or exceed state and district academic standards. As a practical matter, managers of recovery and reconnection programs realize that their claims on public monies (e.g., through charter school funding, Workforce Investment Act funds, or funds-follow-the-student arrangements) depend heavily on their students’ improved academic performance. While these schools and programs work to increase student performance on standardized tests, they frequently supplement such testing with portfolio assessment, exhibition of student work, and other proven ways of evaluating what young people know and are able to do. They emphasize less easily measured qualities such as artistic talent, leadership ability, and social and environmental responsibility. Most also place a high premium on students avoiding negative and harmful behaviors.

***Effective dropout reconnection efforts are comprehensive, youth-centered, flexible, intentional, pragmatic, and inclusive of extensive post-graduation follow-up.*** Some efforts emphasize preparing young people for employment after first building a foundation in literacy and numeracy. Others stress education writ large and, from the outset, urge their participants

to aim for success in postsecondary education. Still others focus on personal development and preparation for responsible adulthood in all its familial and civic dimensions. Likewise, long-established national program models (discussed in Part Two of this report) that merit support are only replicable with sensitive adaptations to local culture, history, and power structures. What they share is an unwavering commitment to putting students at the center. As we often heard from students, these schools and programs often provide the first occasion for them to feel that anyone cares about their success, the first chance for them to feel valued.

***Young people want to learn and succeed.*** Skeptics who doubt that dropouts want to learn and to achieve mainstream employment and respectability should visit the schools and programs described in this report. Most have long waiting lists well beyond their ability to serve. Conversations with the young participants themselves reveal motivated, spirited individuals who realize they have wasted much of their young lives and are eager to change, to learn and grow, to accept adult help, and to make the hard personal effort required to earn a respectable place in their communities. They readily acknowledge that their old lives were not working for them but now revel in their new friends, expanded opportunities, and heightened sense of personal responsibility and optimism.

***Service to others and to the community is a key element of many dropout recovery efforts.*** Successful dropout reconnection depends on more than just success in academic education and employment training, augmented by a broad range of sensitively targeted and accessible support services. Preparing troubled young people for roles as responsible, engaged citizens is an integral, nearly universal characteristic of the successful recovery efforts we studied. We were pleasantly surprised to learn that community service and service-learning are built into many more recovery schools and programs than we had anticipated.

***Committed adults, steadfast in their support of young people’s success, are the key element of dropout recovery.*** Of the many laudable features of impressive recovery schools and programs—program design, institutional structure, and educational methodology, to mention a few—the quality that most distinguishes exemplary efforts is the exceptional caliber of the people who serve in them. Of the key players on a large roster, several groups repeatedly stand out: the

policymakers, many of them elected office-holders, who champion, authorize, and fund recovery efforts; the teachers, mentors, counselors, coaches, and others who commit themselves with passion to direct involvement in the lives of the young people and who make themselves available to them around the clock; and the community leaders, employers, and supportive family members and friends, who help guide out-of-school youth to self-respect and self-sufficiency. Our experience with over 40 programs persuaded us that adults involved in recovery efforts must honestly believe that they can help young people to overcome the ego-smashing effects of past failure and trauma. Repeatedly, in the face of seemingly overwhelming contrary forces, they simply refuse to give up on young people. They search relentlessly for more effective ways to reach and teach even the least promising and most recalcitrant. Many keep close tabs on their students, often well past graduation. Such concern and persistence can help trump many of life's adversities while ennobling both the teacher and the learner.

**Language is an important consideration in the world of dropout recovery.** Many respected leaders in that world conspicuously shun such descriptors as “dropouts,” “at-risk youth,” “kids,” “alternative education,” “nontraditional school” and “second-chance program.” Rather, they view their work as redefining what effective education and youth development really can and should be. They see themselves as authentic reformers, attuned above all to the interests of their students or trainees, people who are not labeled and pigeon-holed as “at-risk” or “errant” youth but, instead, as potentially motivated young adults and students of promise. Program leaders acknowledge the traumatic personal histories that many of these young people have experienced, but they refuse to accept those histories as excuses for continued self-destructive and antisocial behavior. They try, with much success, to treat the youth in their schools and programs as resources whose opinions on the shaping and management of their education can be valuable assets. Listening carefully to young voices is a critical element in most successful recovery and reconnection efforts. The language of staff in recovery schools and programs is revealing: almost invariably they internalize and vocalize their responsibility not to “their” students but to “our” students.

**School districts must take responsibility for all of**

**their young people and show leadership in reaching out to disconnected youth.** Contrary to the widely-held attitude that public schools have little or no interest in helping young people get back on track, some urban school districts, often with powerful support from politicians and business interests, are providing convincing evidence to the contrary. While some school systems are establishing close ties to external, nonprofit, community-based entities to provide their students with a broader portfolio of educational options, others are doing the same entirely within the public school system. As a practical matter, this often means extending their services to adults well beyond the age of compulsory attendance. School districts must be willing to insist that an irrevocable responsibility of public schools is to educate, and educate well, all youth and young adults.

**Many practices prevalent in successful “alternative” and “second-chance” education programs should be adopted by the “first-chance” system to improve student retention and academic success.** When we ask young people who are successfully completing a second-chance recovery program why this program has worked whereas their former high school failed them, they tell us that they no longer feel like a number, that they are now part of a “family” that looks out for them and is genuinely dedicated to their success. They describe satisfying relationships with caring teachers and counselors who treat them like responsible adults and expect the best of them. Most are in programs with low student-to-staff ratios, which permit the development of close-knit personal support systems. Students also emphasize their preference for hands-on, contextualized learning, or experiential education—internships, apprenticeships, field work—that demonstrate the relevance of classroom learning to their present lives and future careers. They appreciate demanding teachers, clear rules, and the flexibility to recover lost credits or accelerate their learning—elements often lacking in their previous schools. What these young people have to tell us must be used to inform any discussion of high school reform.<sup>1</sup>

**While charter schools evoke passionate, often negative, reactions in many educational circles, their flexibility and adaptability make them increasingly popular among nonprofit, community-based organizations dedicated to reconnecting out-of-school youth to the mainstream.** Many secondary schools serving

out-of-school youth have obtained charters, not only to gain access to state education funding, but, more fundamentally, because they believe that public education dollars should serve all young people, including those who have not been successful in traditional schools. They believe that many traditional schools have failed these youth and that the state has a moral obligation to fulfill its promise to educate all of the nation's young people. Public funding, such as payments based on average daily attendance, is seldom enough to cover the full costs of an effective recovery effort. But combining it imaginatively with other public and foundation grants, as entrepreneurial charter school leaders are learning to do, can result in academic and employment gains that compare favorably with those achieved by traditional public schools.

***Dropout recovery efforts are funded largely by state and local public and private revenues.*** Over the past decade, intrepid practitioners and entrepreneurs have also learned how to access monies from other funding streams (e.g., juvenile justice and social welfare), as well as from the burgeoning world of state and local charter school agencies.

***Support from the Federal Government, which otherwise underwrites a large array of education and job training programs, plays a relatively minor role in the genuinely worthwhile endeavor of dropout recovery.***

Funds from neither the US Department of Education's Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act nor the Carl Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, both logical potential sources of help for dropout recovery, are cited by program directors as significant sources of support.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, grants from the now-ended Youth Opportunity Program and Workforce Investment Act (US Department of Labor), the YouthBuild program (US Department of Housing and Urban Development), and AmeriCorps (Corporation for National and Community Service) have been more closely attuned to the missions of these programs, even though they, too, fall far short. It has become ever-clearer that governments at all levels do not yet regard dropout recovery (as distinct from prevention) as a morally or economically compelling priority worthy of major investment of public monies. We believe it most surely is.

***The varied programs and policies described in this report are possible for any community to implement.*** As a number of program directors have noted, effective dropout reconnection is not rocket science.

It lends itself neither to silver bullets nor to simple, universal solutions. Dropout recovery is hard, often frustrating, work, more perspiration than inspiration. At its core, it is a matter of moral and political will, an insistent commitment to do whatever it takes to get the job done--and done right.

Our goal in presenting this report to decision makers and practitioners alike is to highlight some of the ways that remarkably dedicated people are addressing an underrated American dilemma that, to an alarming degree, threatens social stability, weakens our economy, and diminishes the lives of millions of our fellow Americans—and our own. Policymakers of good will have often rallied around causes that they perceive matter; reconnecting our nation's dropouts to the mainstream should be such a cause.

***The nation has more than enough models and know-how to be able to reclaim America's dropouts.***

Although more innovative and efficient approaches will surely emerge over time, perfection will probably always elude this greatly underappreciated field. And that, put bluntly, will be because the toughest problems that the world of recovery and reconnection faces are not basically ones of school reform or program structure. To a large degree, these problems revolve around the central issue of moral and political will, both of which are often in short supply. Without a widely-held popular conviction that dropouts represent an unacceptable loss of life and opportunity both for young people and the nation, real progress will be difficult to achieve.

**Nancy Martin**  
Washington, DC

**Samuel Halperin**  
March 2006

<sup>1</sup> We distinguish between the types of nontraditional schools profiled in this study from the so-called "alternative schools" used by many districts as disciplinary dumping grounds. While the former effectively reconnect out-of-school youth to education, the latter may actually serve to further disconnect youth from schooling.

<sup>2</sup> A large but generally unacknowledged source of effective financial support is the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Part II of the Workforce Investment Act). Administered by the states under funding from the US Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education, the FY 2005 appropriation of \$578.7 million will serve almost three million adult learners, including well over one million in-school and out-of-school 16-24-year-olds.



**PART I: COMMUNITY CASE STUDIES**

# Introduction: Dropout Recovery in Twelve Communities

**T**his first, and major, section of *Whatever It Takes* describes dropout recovery activities in 12 US communities, from New Jersey and Pennsylvania to Oregon and California. To choose these sites, AYPF published a “Request for Leads,” asking leaders in the youth policy, research, and program fields, as well as key staff in each state department of education, to contribute recommendations of exemplary dropout reconnection efforts. Based on these responses, a list of more than 100 recommended schools, programs, and initiatives was generated, and these were screened for three criteria: comprehensiveness, award of a recognized credential, and primary focus on dropout recovery (as differentiated from prevention). Case study examples were selected to cover a range of programs and policies to reconnect out-of-school youth, with emphasis on innovation and success. To avoid duplicating the work of ongoing research, a number of other dropout recovery efforts were not profiled in this study.<sup>1</sup>

After reading descriptive materials posted on the nominees’ websites and conducting telephone interviews with program directors, principals and community leaders, the authors (and American Youth Policy Forum and National Youth Employment Coalition colleagues, Betsy Brand, Rachel Hare, Jennifer Lerner, Sarah Pearson, and Kristen Henry) visited the sites during the six-month period ending in October 2005. What follows is the information gathered and our subjective reactions to what we experienced.

Our profiles of dropout reconnection efforts in a dozen cities are, therefore, only a sampling, illustrating various modes of reconnecting out-of-school youth to education, employment, and civic participation; this is not a scientifically rigorous survey. The 12 profiles illustrate what is actually happening today to reengage disconnected youth. We hope they will serve as a practical resource for those leaders—whether at the school, program, district, city, county, or state level—who are in a position to make additional commitments to reconnect their communities’ dropouts to the economic, educational, and social

mainstream.

The schools, programs, policies, and practices profiled here deserve far greater public attention and support than they are receiving. In the course of our site visits, we came to admire dozens of remarkable educators, youth workers, program managers and staff, and their supporters, who work both within and outside of local government. Equally impressive were the many young people who had dropped out before completing high school, but who ultimately decided to seek a high school diploma, GED, or other organized career preparation program. These youth were generally working against great odds and juggling responsibilities that often obstructed their paths to a productive future. Often, we wondered if we ourselves could have overcome the roadblocks of inadequate schools, homelessness, frequent family moves, poverty, parenting at a young age, fear of abuse and violence, among others, that impede the way of so many young people today.

Eight of the communities in *Whatever It Takes* have programs housed within their public school systems. Others have schools and programs created and operated by entrepreneurial, public-spirited citizens working through community-based organizations. State charter school legislation and its accompanying public funding are especially important to this group of schools pursuing dropout recovery.

In the Introduction to this report, we assert that reconnecting dropouts is not rocket science. Rather, it is more an exercise in imagining what might be, of having the skills, the will, and the stamina to shape reality in more creative and positive directions. There is no one perfect model or blueprint for successful dropout recovery. On reflection, though, we think readers will find that most of the following characteristics of effective dropout recovery efforts recur throughout the community reports:

**Open-Entry/Open-Exit**—Most programs are open-entry/open-exit, with students proceeding through curricular modules at their own pace. Graduation occurs once the student has successfully completed state and district requirements. Some

programs use teacher-developed curricula keyed to state standards. Extensive use of computer-assisted technology (frequently PLATO or EXTRA Learning System software) and the Internet are common. Such flexibility is crucial to schools and programs serving youth with vastly different skill levels and needs.

**Flexible Scheduling and Year-round Learning**—Flexible scheduling and year-round learning are common features of successful dropout recovery schools and programs. One program has five eight-week sessions interspersed with two-week breaks. Another uses trimesters with an extended school-supervised internship in the field. Two-hundred-day school years and longer school days are common. Many programs include a half-day of hands-on field work, such as skill-building through home construction, computer repair, or conservation work. Others are half-day academic programs, with a choice of early, midday, or evening classes. Such built-in flexibility accommodates students who have family and work responsibilities.

**Teachers As Coaches, Facilitators, and Crew Leaders**—Reliance on self-paced learning in small, personalized learning communities often changes teacher roles to those of facilitators, coaches, and crew leaders. Because the emphasis is on close, informal relationships, many students call staff by their first names, and symbols of authority such as teacher desks and privileges available only to staff are often absent. The message sent to program participants is: “You are an adult. We respect you. We are here to help you achieve your goals.”

**Real-world, Career-Oriented Curricula**—Curricula in successful community-based schools and programs tend to be real-world and career-oriented, with an eye toward local employer needs, such as entry-level positions in hospitals and the construction trades. Teachers and program managers recognize that success in employment, not simply the acquisition of paper credentials, is the near-term objective of their students and trainees. In the school programs and initiatives profiled, extensive investments are made in preparing students for postsecondary education, post-graduation employment, and further advancement in the world of work.

**Opportunities for Employment**—Recognizing that many students need income to support themselves and their families, many schools and programs arrange employment opportunities in summer and afterschool hours for their students or offer modest

stipends for work performed while in training. Work opportunities related to their educational programs provide students much-needed income while stressing specific career goals. Many program directors wish that they could also provide stipend incentives for hours spent in academic study.

**Clear Codes of Conduct with Consistent Enforcement**—Although dropout recovery programs serve a high proportion of young people who have been involved in juvenile justice systems or expelled from previous schools for disciplinary reasons, few programs experience serious violations or expulsions, and even fewer believe that security personnel or metal detectors are needed. Staff and students enforce honor codes and contracts (e.g., no violence, no bullying, no drugs) and strict standards of attendance and effort. Instead of strong reliance on punitive discipline or security measures to make their schools and programs safe, dropout recovery administrators use the positive rewards of learning, achievement, and peer recognition to great success.

**Extensive Support Services**—Virtually all schools and programs engaged in dropout recovery recognize that students require extensive support services, notably those related to health and physical well-being, to overcome barriers to learning. Pregnant and parenting students, in particular, need child care and instruction in child development if they are to concentrate on their academic programs. Many program leaders report a high incidence of homelessness among their students, a problem few programs are able to address effectively. Nor are all schools and programs able to afford professional counselors, case managers, and social workers, but most identify this need as a top priority. Above all, young people need—and want—caring adults who counsel, mentor, and guide them.

**A Portfolio of Options for a Varied Group**—Young people who drop out of school are a heterogeneous group that requires a wide range of reconnection options. Students leave school for a variety of reasons and have many different barriers to success upon reentry. Strong dropout recovery efforts are varied and offer students a wide range of program options. Larger schools and programs are able to present a number of programs so that students may choose the program that best meets their needs. When this type of “portfolio of options” is offered by a school district, such as in Portland, Oregon, and Jefferson County, Kentucky, the opportunities



for students to reconnect and succeed are greatly enhanced.

The sum total of what is reported in these pages is a hopeful, even inspiring, perspective on what is being done to return thousands of American young people to productive participation in the nation's economy and society. We urge our readers to make similar contributions to the public good by studying this report, contacting the caring women and men who daily create, manage, and refine their mission of reclaiming out-of-school youth, and then proceeding to explore and shape authentic ways to achieve equally laudable results in their own communities.

---

<sup>1</sup> See page 167 for additional resources on dropout reconnection.

## CHAPTER I

## Montgomery County (Dayton), Ohio

- *A county-led, targeted dropout recovery effort with political will in abundance*
- *Charter schools for the out-of-school youth population*

**W**ith a population of 161,696, Dayton is the main jurisdiction of Montgomery County in western Ohio, which, as in much of what has been termed the “rust belt,” has been attempting to cope with major losses of industrial jobs. Especially hard hit are the city’s less-educated young people, of whom Dayton has more than its fair share. According to the 2000 US Census, 5,514 of Dayton’s 18-24 year-olds (23%) had earned neither a high school diploma nor a GED, compared with 18,525 persons 25 and over (18%). In March 2005, the Ohio Graduation Tests, taken at the end of the 10th grade, became a requirement for high school graduation, and many educators across the state fear that this requirement could lead to an even larger out-of-school youth population.

In 1998, local leaders in government, business, and education, who were profoundly concerned about the economic and social ramifications of these disturbing realities, established the Montgomery County Out-of-School Youth Task Force, with much of its political leadership contributed by the County Administrator. One of its first moves was to establish an institutionalized and centralized city-wide system of dropout recovery for out-of-school youth, a wise but often overlooked action. With strong support from Sinclair Community College, Dayton is now home to the Sinclair Fast Forward Center, which was to become a uniquely efficient central clearinghouse to recover dropouts. Out-of-school youth need make only one telephone call to reach a staff person qualified to lead them to opportunities for second-chance education and skills training geared to the needs of a wide range of programs for the dropout population. Descriptions of three of these programs—**Improved Solutions for Urban Systems (ISUS)**, **Mound Street Academies**, and the **Life Skills Center**—follow.

### **A Community Responds: The Montgomery County Out-of-School Youth Initiative**

The Montgomery County Out-of-School Youth Task Force’s main objective in 1998 was to recommend what the county could do to reclaim its dropouts and serve them most beneficially. At the time, the County was spending over two-thirds of its budget on criminal justice or human services, including social services and welfare benefits—disproportionately on school dropouts. The Dayton Business Committee, a long-established entity, estimated that 5,000 to 6,000 high school-aged Montgomery County youth—a conservative number, according to many local sources—were out of school. Tackling a much-needed community effort in a time of budgetary restraints was a tough job, but the key to using resources wisely lay in a targeted dropout recovery initiative.

County Administrator Deborah Feldman credits Frederick Smith, a Dayton business leader and community philanthropist, with having convinced her to attack the dropout issue shortly after she assumed the post in June 1997. Widely regarded as the “moral compass” of the community, Smith explained that, if only for economic reasons, the County simply had to address dropout recovery. “It became clear,” said Feldman, “that there was no one responsible for dropouts until they committed a crime or had a baby. We were doing little to keep people from coming into our [social welfare and criminal justice] systems; and if it was one criterion that was bringing them to our systems, it was lack of education.” With Smith’s

*“No one was responsible for dropouts until they committed a crime or had a baby.”*

—Deborah Feldman,  
Montgomery County County Administrator

help, Feldman brought a dropout resolution to the County Commissioners who voted to create the Out-of-School Youth Task Force.

Feldman and Smith brought together members of the business, education, and criminal justice communities to serve on the Task Force, which defined out-of-school youth as “youth who are enrolled, but not regularly participating in an educational program, and all youth (with special emphasis on those under 18 years of age) who are in need of help to be reintegrated into an educational setting resulting in a high school diploma, GED, or economic self-sufficiency.”

The Task Force has remained focused on its goal of helping out-of-school youth obtain a high school diploma and/or a living wage job. An earlier Annie E. Casey Foundation report on Dayton had revealed that the community continued to fail out-of-school youth when they simply returned to the Dayton Public Schools with little or no follow-through. Reacting to this untenable reality, the Task Force set about designing and creating a new system that became, in effect, a “phantom school district for dropouts.” Once it had decided on a centralized, institutionalized way to deal with dropout recovery, it ran focus groups to determine where its services should be located. Sinclair Community College, no stranger to innovation and a key resource across the area, was the clear winner.

### **Sinclair Community College**

Although 30% of its students come from outside the county, Sinclair Community College is a key community resource in Montgomery County. A County tax levy generates approximately \$21 million annually for the college. As evidence of the esteem it enjoys, a remarkable 72% of the County’s voters approved a targeted increase in their property taxes in 1998 to support Sinclair.

The Out-of-School Youth Task Force quickly realized that if the program was to succeed, Sinclair would have to be a driving force and major player, much more than just an administrative headquarters. Dayton’s citizens would be more willing to support the initiative if they knew that their community college would be an integral, functioning part of the process. For many out-of-school youth, attending Sinclair had always been the ultimate educational goal. In focus groups about Sinclair, they talked about access to it as a centerpiece of their own growth and development. It symbolized success to

dropouts, while local school superintendents did not see it as a competitor. Not surprisingly, it became the institutional home of the critically important central referral site for dropouts, which is now known as the Sinclair Fast Forward Center.

The Task Force, however, knew from the outset that it could not ask Sinclair to pay for the program. In addition, local foundations and business interests wanted to fund youth programming, not the administrative costs that would accompany it. Consequently, the President of the Montgomery County Commission requested that the college’s leadership support the project while pledging \$500,000 annually for five years beginning in 2001. Though faced with the issue of “mission enlargement or mission creep,” the college decided the issue was too important not to become involved. Montgomery County continues to provide \$500,000 per year to the Sinclair Fast Forward Center.

Almost predictably, the college’s key departments, as well as the Sinclair Community College Foundation, have weighed in, usually gratis, with many varieties of support, including helping to raise money, ensuring that funds are properly managed, and inviting the right people to support the Task Force’s work.

Sinclair’s involvement quickly attracted other parties to the initiative. Prevent Blindness Ohio, through the support of a local foundation, provides eye examinations and glasses to every student in need. The Dayton Development Coalition conducted a golf outing to raise money for the Fast Forward Center. Sinclair’s leadership was a strong influence in obtaining grants from the US Department of Labor and the State of Ohio. Private fundraising was also enhanced because the Sinclair Community College Foundation requested it. Businesses, hospitals, and others have contributed much-needed time, talent, and resources.

To raise money, the Task Force approached the state, only to be told that Ohio’s state education agency limited funding to programs for young people still in school. At that point, they decided to seek state charters to create publicly funded charter schools in order to tap into the public education funding structure. Although an existing program, Improved Solutions for Urban Systems (ISUS), had been serving former dropouts since 1992, the Task Force believed that the community needed a variety of options to serve the large and diverse out-of-

school population. In 2002, the Task Force obtained a charter to create the Mound Street Academies, even though its leaders have believed from the Academies' inception that this structure, which relies heavily on state charter school funding for schools leading to a high school diploma, leaves out students, notably older youth who have accumulated very few credits and for whom a diploma is an unlikely goal. Also, local school districts initially viewed charter schools as competitors draining funds from the public school system, as is the case in many jurisdictions. In addition to state charter funding, the County has been able to leverage Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and private donations for its out-of-school youth work.

The Dayton business community has played a major role in raising funds for the Out-of-School Youth Initiative. Led by Jerry Tatar, former President, Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer of Mead Corporation (an office supply company headquartered in Dayton), it has raised a hefty \$3.5 million, primarily for use in starting programs. Tatar argues the Out-of-School Youth Initiative has been one of Dayton's most successful community ventures.

### Sinclair Fast Forward Center

Dayton's out-of-school youth who seek information on continuing their education can start by calling "512-FAST," the telephone number of the Sinclair Fast Forward Center. A centralized dropout referral service that assists youth in re-entering various forms of education and job training, the Fast Forward Center has proved itself to be an important first step for them to enter (or re-enter) the world of education and/or job training. Recognized by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network with a Crystal Star Award for its excellence in dropout recovery, the Center does initial assessment and case management for those seeking to continue their education.

A department of Sinclair Community College, also called the Montgomery County Out-of-School Youth Initiative, refers out-of-school youth aged 15-21 to area alternative education options. It also distributes newsletters, annual reports, and evaluations of the Montgomery County Out-of-School Youth Initiative to local, state, and national organizations, and replies to questions on educational options for out-of-school youth. Although not a public relations operation, the Fast Forward Center does much to inform the community about the Out-of-School Youth

### Sinclair Fast Forward Center Enrollment 2004-2005

Provider	Number of Students
Dayton Public Schools GED Program	838
East End Community Service Corporation	25
Life Skills Center	340
Improved Solutions for Urban Systems	381
Mound Street Academies	362
Miami Valley Career and Technical College-Youth Connections	161
New Choices Middle School	162
Webster Street Academy	63
Additional Schools	415
Dayton Urban League (Proficiency Intervention)	305
<b>Total Students</b>	<b>3,052</b>

Initiative.

Because the state created high school graduation requirements that took effect in 1993, many Dayton students find themselves with enough credits to graduate from high school, yet unable to pass the state test and receive their diplomas. The Sinclair Fast Forward Center refers students in this category, ages 22-30, to the Dayton Public Schools GED program.

The Fast Forward Center functions simply, yet effectively. Callers to 512-FAST are each scheduled for a one-hour assessment to which they must bring their Social Security Card, photo identification, birth certificate, and proof of residency. These are forwarded to the new schools which enables students to be placed quickly. After the initial assessment, counselors meet with students to help them choose an educational placement. A up-to-date database enables the Center to follow students and ensure they have been properly placed.

Rather than place the Fast Forward Center on the Sinclair Community College campus, the Task Force decided to locate it in the Dayton Job Mall, a former business warehouse which now houses many

county employment and social service agencies and organizations. The centerpiece of the Job Mall is the Montgomery County Job Center, the largest one-stop employment and training center in the United States. At the Job Mall, young people can be put directly in touch with a gamut of possibilities, such as Job Corps, Brighter Futures, and Lutheran Social Services, to name a few. As an added benefit, parents accompanying their children to the Center are often able to locate services for themselves and their families. Putting the Fast Forward Center in the Job Mall has been a successful move; Dayton area youth know where it is and feel comfortable going there.

In SY 2004-2005, the Fast Forward Center enrolled 3,052 students in various dropout recovery programs. Now four years old, the Center continues to grow. The majority of its enrollees who are not in the GED programs of the Dayton Public School system have gravitated to one of three dropout recovery programs, all of them charter schools: Improved Solutions for Urban Systems, Mound Street Academies, and the Life Skills Center (each described below).

In SY 2004-2005 school year, 310 of the 1,244 out-of-school youth referred by the Fast Forward Center to one of Dayton's high school dropout recovery programs received a diploma, while 89 earned a GED; this was a sizable increase from the 234 students who received high school diplomas and the 65 who earned a GED the previous school year and the 175 and 60 youth, respectively, in SY 2002-2003.

### Funding

The Fast Forward Center's operational costs are funded by \$500,000 Montgomery County Grant for its internal expenses, which encompass student assessments and marketing and evaluations of programs. Remaining Fast Forward Center funds are passed straight to the direct service providers. These grants include: the Montgomery County Jobs and Family Services' TANF program, a 21st Century Learning Grant, and a state of Ohio grant. The 21st Century Learning Grant, received in 2004, provides \$1.2 million over five years from the federal 21st Century Community Learning Center to be used at Mound Street Academies for afterschool enrichment programs. The TANF funds, through a County agreement, are used by ISUS and New Choices Middle School.

Since the Center opened in 2002 its annual budget has increased by more than half, from

### Sinclair Fast Forward Center Revenue Summary 2006

Montgomery County Grant	\$500,000: 14%
21st Century Grant	\$274,000: 8%
State of Ohio Grant	\$750,000: 22%
Montgomery County Jobs and Family Services—TANF	\$1,100,000: 32%
Gifts/Pledges/Earnings to Date	\$704,162: 20%
On Hand	\$150,624: 4%

\$2,040,351 to \$3,333,083 in Fiscal Year 2006. Because a large portion of its funding comes from Montgomery County, permanent funding is a special challenge in the all-too-familiar times of tight budgets.

### Improved Solutions for Urban Systems

Established as a nonprofit organization charged with researching and developing innovative strategies for self-sufficiency, Improved Solutions for Urban Systems (ISUS) has been at the forefront of Dayton's dropout reconnection efforts since 1992. It began as a project to help dropouts and near-dropouts acquire construction skills while completing their high school diplomas or preparing for their GED tests. In 1999, the Ohio Board of Education accepted a proposal to charter the ISUS Trade and Technology Prep Community Charter School, the state's first charter school with an explicit mission of reconnecting out-of-school youth. Currently, ISUS operates three charter schools in Dayton with two more to be added in 2006.<sup>1</sup>

*A GED didn't do it, so ISUS added the high school diploma; but that didn't really do it either, so they added certification. "It encourages people to move up the ladder and provides a common-sense approach to doing so."*

—Ann Higdon, ISUS President



Students at ISUS charter schools work toward a high school diploma while being trained in high-demand fields; their academic curriculum is thus closely aligned with hands-on training. In other words, the ISUS program is, as ISUS's dynamic President Ann Higdon has said, "high school plus." In an average of two years, ISUS students earn both a diploma and an industry-recognized credential in one of four career fields: construction, manufacturing, health care, or computer technology. "A GED didn't do it, so we convinced the state that these youth could pass the state exams and earn a high school diploma," explains Higdon; "but that didn't really do it either, so we added certification. It encourages people to move up the ladder and provides a common-sense approach to doing so."

Each ISUS charter school focuses on a different career track and hires qualified members of the related industry to train students, bolster the curriculum, and help former dropouts to get decent jobs for which they are clearly prepared. Students in the **Construction Technology Program** follow training modules created by the National Center for Construction Education and Research to obtain certification. Those in **Health Care**, a partnership with Kettering College of Medical Arts, work toward a credential of nurse's assistant or licensed practical nurse. Students in the **Manufacturing Technology** program are trained for the advanced manufacturing industry. Those in **Computer Technology** learn about software and how to repair hardware while working towards A+ certification. Whatever their fields may be, all ISUS students receive extensive on-the-job training from skilled professionals.

Because most students come to ISUS lagging academically, the curriculum is competency-based rather than Carnegie-unit based. Its schools thus operate on a longer school day and year, enabling students to move through the curriculum at an average of 2.2 grades per year. They are in school eight hours per day, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., 210 days per year. Most districts around Dayton operate on a six or six-and-one-half-hour day, 180 days per year. Approximately one-third of each student's time is spent on academic subjects, one-third on technical training, and one-third on hands-on field work. In any given quarter, students take courses in either civics and language arts or science and math while also attending technical training classes and working in real job environments. To receive a high school diploma, ISUS



*ISUS President Ann Higdon with a student construction crew. (Photo courtesy of Dayton Business Journal)*

students must pass all five Ohio Graduation Tests, all core academic subjects, and a career readiness assessment, as well as maintain at least a 90% attendance rate during their final year. Diplomas from ISUS have the same value as those from any other high school in the area.

The school year is divided into quarters with students in the manufacturing and construction programs spending one quarter practicing skills such as building wall panels for affordable housing or constructing homes on site. Health care and computer students alternate on a half-day basis during their service quarter between working in the partner hospital and refurbishing donated computers for inner city children.

A personalized, family-like atmosphere characterizes ISUS, with an enviable teacher-to-student ratio of 1:15 and class sizes averaging between 12 and 16 students. Staff and students participate in "family meetings" twice daily to discuss issues and recognize achievements. Dedicated counselors are available to help participants with issues arising outside of the school walls. The schools are all designed to start with a small student enrollment and to grow to no more than 250 students per year. Currently, the construction school numbers 250 students, the technology/manufacturing school enrolls 80, and the health care school has 60. The waiting list for entrance to ISUS schools shows six applicants for each available slot. Ohio requires that ISUS fill open spaces by lottery.



In addition to employing certified teachers, ISUS hires experienced journeymen, craftsmen, and other professionals to teach students. Because funding under terms of the federal Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1998 requires educators to have vocational certification, ISUS underwrites coursework at Wright State University for its noncertified instructors to obtain vocational certification. It favors hiring staff from relevant industries and currently employs 14 such instructors. Thus, ISUS can hire instructors with industry experience to create a real-world learning experience and environment for students. Altogether, ISUS employs 31 teachers for its approximately 350 students.

The students in ISUS programs are all former dropouts or near-dropouts ages 16-22 of whom four out of five have been court-involved. Nearly two-thirds are African American and 35% of the students are White. Although two-thirds of the students are from Dayton, ISUS schools have open enrollment for the entire state of Ohio.

ISUS lays out clear, consistent, and tough rules for its students, including a zero-tolerance policy for fighting and locked doors once the school day starts. Students take the rules very seriously and speak of their role in not allowing their peers to fight. While the rules at ISUS are stringent, students who enter the program extol the benefits of being in a place where they are part of a community of mutual respect.

### The ISUS Student

- Virtually 100% dropouts
- 97% erratic attendance/habitually truant (upon entry)
- 92% severely credit deficient; not meeting or exceeding state benchmarks or standards; behind age group in basic skills
- 81% adjudicated delinquents/youth offenders/court-involved
- 63% qualify for free or reduced lunch
- 57% severe discipline problems (upon entry)
- 20% youth with learning or physical disabilities
- 10% previously expelled
- 9% parents/pregnant
- 3% foster youth

*“We are social entrepreneurs.”*

—Ann Higdon, ISUS President

Of ISUS President Ann Higdon says “we are social entrepreneurs,” and she embodies this philosophy by combining a deep concern for disconnected youth, a big picture view of community development in Dayton, and keen business savvy. A visit to Dayton shows how ISUS students are transforming whole neighborhoods through a focused strategy to rebuild and turn around disadvantaged areas of the city. ISUS has plans to rebuild 60 houses in the Wolf Creek Neighborhood, designing and building about ten dwellings annually. With these new homes being sold to low- and moderate-income families, the neighborhood, once full of boarded up and dilapidated properties, is becoming an attractive area for families. Students are also rebuilding a former 200,000 square-foot plumbing supply warehouse to house the construction and manufacturing schools. To date, ISUS students have completed 37 houses and an eight-unit apartment building and have helped design and build an exact replica of the childhood house of aircraft pioneers Orville and Wilbur Wright. In 2003, Professional Builders’ Magazine awarded ISUS the “Best in American Living Award” for the quality of its construction work. Added recognition has come from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development “Excellence Award” and the Dayton Business Journal’s “Not For Profit Business of the Year Award.”

### ISUS Funding by Category

Average Daily Attendance (Charter School Funding)	44%
Perkins Vocational-Technical Education Funds	16%
Private Sources (foundations, corporations, and individuals)	20%
Other Government Funding	13%
NCLB Titles 1–6	5%
Special Education—IDEA	2%



*Left: Students concentrating on their assignments. Right: ISUS students in the Kettering College program listen as their teacher demonstrates taking vitals from a patient in the emergency room. (Photos courtesy of ISUS)*

Building on the success of its programs, ISUS is creating a campus of five small schools, each with its own faculty, each teaching a different trade, and each growing to no more than 250 students. If there are comparable achievements in the field of dropout recovery, they are few and far between.

The ISUS charter schools receive average daily attendance (ADA) funding through Ohio state agencies. (This funding is based on actual attendance, while traditional public schools receive funding based on a yearly count taken in October. ISUS submits daily student attendance, which averages an encouraging 84%.) Two-thirds of its funding comes from the Ohio Department of Education, whose principal resources for this work—ADA, Perkins, Special Education—IDEA, and NCLB Titles 1 through 6—originate in the US federal budget. The rest is from private and other government funding sources. These include YouthBuild, AmeriCorps, TANF funds for job training, and support from the Dayton Rotary Club. Higdon secured a personal loan of \$100,000 to start ISUS from National City Bank, whose then-President was a Rotarian. With the support of several Rotary leaders, ISUS received a \$175,000 contribution from the Rotary club in the third year of the program; it was the largest gift the Club had made since its inception in 1913.

Taking nothing for granted, ISUS focuses on developing new resources and has found them by defining the organization creatively and devising new ways to be useful to the community. One example is its new wall panel manufacturing facility, an asset

that helps make it a serious player in the competition for Dayton's and Montgomery County's funds for affordable housing. For students who may still be involved with the courts, ISUS strives to demonstrate that employability can contribute to prevention and intervention.

### **Collaborating with Kettering College of Medical Arts**

ISUS has a new health careers track that attempts to expand the area's health care workforce. Students in the program earn a high school diploma and while attaining certification as a nurse's assistant or licensed practical nurse. For these they take ISUS courses taught by Kettering College instructors. The college is motivated by its 17% vacancy rate in positions at some of its affiliated hospitals and the need for graduates to stay in the Dayton area. It views ISUS graduates as high-performing and likely to remain in town after graduation. Winona Winkler Wendth, Director of College Advancement and Alumni Relations at Kettering College, said of the partnership with ISUS: "Kettering College has had a reputation of being rather insular. We've realized we can't survive and be limited. We want to thrive. We need the energy of students like those ISUS can provide. Dayton needs energy and it needs to stay here. Everything good that happens to ISUS is going to happen to us."

## ISUS Student Perspectives

**Travis**, a 16-year-old ISUS student, reports he was “out-of-control” before entering the school. He was expelled twice and in and out of jail, committing his first felony at age 14. “Drugs dominated my life. I was a 15-year-old alcoholic.” Travis felt that if he went back to a traditional high school he would be 20 before he obtained his diploma and would probably end up back in prison; instead, he entered a treatment facility where a peer told him about ISUS. When he left the treatment center, he came to ISUS and immediately noticed how friendly everyone was. “You have to want success to make it here. But if you come, you’ll see that you’re not just another number. You’re an individual. It really helps build your confidence.”

**Aisha** dropped out of school at 16 from a large public high school after failing 9th grade three years in a row. “There were too many people at my old school and I hardly ever went. The teachers didn’t know me and I got into a lot of fights.” She was also put on probation for running away from home. When Aisha became pregnant, her probation officer told her she had to go back to school and she came to ISUS. “When I told people I was pregnant and in high school,” she said, “a lot of people were surprised, since most girls just drop out when they have a baby. At ISUS they help you find ways to come back and get your diploma.”

Twenty-year-old **Matthew** left school for four years before coming to ISUS. He failed 9th grade twice and hated being in school where he had no friends and had to deal with bullies. “The teachers at my old school were just there for the paycheck. At ISUS I’ve had an easier time making friends, and I feel like the teachers really care,” said Matthew, who is now studying for his A+ computer certification.

ISUS students are genuinely committed to their school. Some students even drive from other cities in Ohio to come to school each day. Students continually speak of their close relationships with teachers. Dedicated staff frequently come to work, unpaid, during school vacations to give their students a safe haven. According to one student, “we come here when we have nowhere to go.”

## Mound Street Academics

Mound Street Academics opened in the fall of 2002 to provide more educational alternatives for Dayton’s out-of-school youth population. It consists of three career-based alternative schools for students ages 15-22 who have dropped out: the **Military Careers Academy**, the **Health Careers Academy**, and the **IT Careers Academy**. All three combine computer-based academic instruction with career exploration and work-based learning to help students earn a high school diploma and gain a career focus. Students spend half the day in academic instruction and half in career-based learning, in paid employment, or at a volunteer job. Students receive elective credit for work experience. They must be Ohio residents, with priority given to former Dayton Public Schools students.

Mound Street’s academic courses are competency-based and aligned to the Ohio Department of Education academic standards. Students take one or two courses at a time using coursework provided by web-based PLATO learning systems, and they maintain individual computer accounts accessible from any location with an Internet connection. They can take Sinclair Community College courses online, at the college, or on the Mound Street campus and receive both college and high school credit, a potentially strong incentive for credit-short dropouts. They complete the program at their own pace, usually within two years. The attractive bottom line is that graduates earn a high school diploma and often also complete college course work while at Mound Street.

The **Military Careers Academy** allows students to explore job opportunities in both the military and civilian work forces, especially in engineering, automotive, and industrial technologies careers. Through an arrangement with Sinclair Community College’s Division of Engineering and Industrial Technologies, students receive hands-on training while earning both high school and college credit for successful completion of college-level courses. Wright Patterson Air Force Base offers job-shadowing, mentoring, and tutoring opportunities for Military Careers Academy students.

The **Health Careers Academy** prepares students to enter health career fields through related employment, job-shadowing, internships, and volunteer work. Students may participate in programs at the Mound Street campus to become nurse’s aides and patient care assistants. Typifying the program’s range

**Mound Street Academies  
2004-05 Student Information**

Students served	606
Graduates	106
Total hours of unpaid community service	15,280
Total Carnegie Credits earned	1,617.5

and flexibility, Health Careers students take courses at Sinclair Community College, receiving both college and high school credit for having successfully completed courses in Sinclair’s Division of Allied Health Technologies. Career preparation in dietetics and culinary arts is yet another Health Careers option.

The **IT Careers Academy** links students to careers in the main pathways of information technology: information services and support, network systems, programming and software development, and interactive media. Teachers help place students in related employment, job-shadowing, internships, and volunteer positions, as in the other two Mound Street Academies. Some Sinclair courses can yield both high school and college credit.

Mound Street is located in a former office building, which helps to create a business-like atmosphere. Students are clearly at work in this “no nonsense, no distractions” atmosphere in which they sit in cubicles with their own computer, and are grouped into classes of 20 with one certified teacher. Students work on self-paced computer-based instruction for more than three hours daily under the guidance of licensed teachers who inevitably come to serve them as advocate, confidante, tester, skills instructor, employment counselor, mentor, and sometimes even surrogate parent. They often act as case managers by aiding students to become better-rounded, more responsible members of their communities. The three principals of the Academies believe their 18-teacher staff (six in each academy) possess a combination of relevant professional experience and caring attitudes, the key to reaching young people.

**Typical Mound Street Success Stories**

After three years in a public high school, Latoyia dropped out and stayed away for a full school year before enrolling in the Health Careers Academy. As a dropout, she had been in trouble with the law. Fortunately, she realized that she needed an education and that a high school diploma was of greater value than a GED. Latoyia regards Mound Street as her second chance, has an excellent attendance record, and is a diligent worker both at school and at home, where she does her academic work on her own computer.

**Tammy** enrolled at Mound Street Military Academy when it opened in September 2002 and in two years earned all 20 1/2 credits for high school graduation and passed three proficiency tests. Already the mother of one daughter when she enrolled, she gave birth to her second daughter a month after enrolling at Mound Street and to a son two years later. She plans to pursue nursing as a career after graduation and believes strongly that “if I can become successful, so can everyone else!”

**Travis** enrolled in the IT Academy with only three high school credits and quickly earned five more. He had had a rough time in the foster care system, which he had entered several years earlier. Since coming to Mound Street, Travis has compiled a strong attendance record, is the lead student in his class for the Mound Street Life and Job Skills Fair, and contributes to activities that improve the Academy. His foster mother said, “I believe we have ourselves a success story here.”

Mound Street’s association with Sinclair Community College is at the core of its work. Betsy Apolito, Principal of the Health Careers Academy said, “Sinclair shows them they can be successful at a higher level,” and the students make much of their affiliation, particularly their courses there. They pay \$25 for each Sinclair course and sign an agreement stating that Mound Street will pay the remaining course tuition for students who earn a grade of “C” or better. This uniquely attractive option also stipulates that students are responsible for paying the tuition if they earn a lower grade. The agreement ensures that the Mound Street students studying at Sinclair are committed to attending and applying themselves in their classes.





Ohio State Superintendent of Instruction, Dr. Susan Tave Zelman, visits Mound Street. (Photo courtesy of the Fast Forward Center)

Beyond academic courses, Mound Street offers a variety of extracurricular activities. Working with a local artist, for example, Mound Street students have learned how to play and build their own steel drums on which they perform at graduation. In addition, teachers sponsor songwriting and film clubs for students.

In SY 2004-2005, the Mound Street Academies served 606 students and had 106 graduates, all of whom possess Career Passports, portfolios including a resume, cover letter, and samples of work, and that can be shown potential employers. In the same school year, 99 students took college-level courses at Sinclair Community College. By graduation, they had earned 1,617.5 Carnegie Credits and \$435,657.13 in paid employment and had performed 15,280 hours of unpaid community service. What makes the number even more impressive is that 85% to 90% of Mound Street Academies' students are economically disadvantaged, many hold part-time jobs, and 25% are single parents. Nearly three-fourths (73%) are African American and 22% are White.

### Life Skills Center

Dayton offers yet another option for formerly out-of-school youth ages 16-22: a state-funded, for-profit charter school owned and operated by White Hat Management, an Akron-based educational management organization. Its centerpiece is the Life Skills

### Mound Street Academies Class of 2004 Follow-Up

	Number of Students	Percentage of Students
<b>All Academies</b>		
Positive Placement	74	95%
	Average hourly wage: \$8.34	
No Placement	4	5%
<b>Health Careers Academy</b>		
Positive Placement	15	100%
	Average hourly wage: \$8.73	
<b>IT Careers Academy</b>		
Positive Placement	32	94%
	Average hourly wage: \$8.44	
No Placement	2	6%
<b>Military Careers Academy</b>		
Positive Placement	29	94%
	Average hourly wage: \$8.07	
No Placement	2	6%

\*Positive Placement refers to students who are working full/part-time, attending school full/part-time, working and/or attending school, in the application process to attend school, or in the military. No Placement means that the student is neither working nor seeking a job or education.

Center, which opened its doors in January 2005. The Center's director, James Brown, formerly headed the Sinclair Fast Forward Center and was instrumental in bringing White Hat Management to Dayton.

The Life Skills Center operates three four-hour sessions per day using computer-based instruction that allow students to work at their own pace. In addition to the computer-based curriculum, Life Skills teachers work one-on-one with students. The sessions involve three hours of academic work and one hour of "life skills," in which students practice resume writing, prepare for higher education and learn other job-related skills. Life Skills students can earn a high school diploma by completing all state requirements. In addition to academic subject, Life Skills Center has a vocational component, which requires

students to complete 90 hours of community service in order to graduate. Students receive one credit for every 150 hours they work and can earn up to four credits for on-the-job experience. Each class has a student-to-teacher ratio of 11:1 and each student has a computer. There are no minimal skill-level requirements for students to begin studying at the Life Skills Center.

Life Skills Centers are fully-funded as charter schools through the State of Ohio Department of Education and are tuition-free. Like other Ohio charter schools, the Life Skills Center receives \$37 a day from the state for each student in attendance. Students pay a \$10 one-time activity fee for the cost of basic supplies and a student identification card.

The reputation of Life Skills is partly due to James Brown's qualifications and personal charisma. "I'm a ghetto kid," said Brown. "I understand them." Brown claims the success of the program is due in large part to the competitive atmosphere it has engendered. The school is entirely credit-oriented, with students having individual scoreboards to keep track of what they have accomplished and what is left to complete. They must earn 22 credits using either the PLATO or A+ software. The Life Skills motto is "no credit—no diploma."

The Center opened with 350 students and had graduated 13 students six months later in June 2005. White Hat Management operates Life Skills Centers throughout Ohio, Arizona, Colorado, and Michigan and has enabled 4,700 students to earn high school diplomas. Staff at Life Skills receive starting salaries comparable to those of teachers in Montgomery County and can earn cash bonuses based on their Center's performance. White Hat determines the bonus based on the Center's enrollment, attendance, and graduation rates. To date, the Dayton Life Skills Center has enrolled approximately 100 more students than originally projected and has opened a third computer lab to accommodate the growing enrollment

### Lessons from Dayton

Dayton's ambitious and resourceful approach to the gnawing but under publicized matter of dropout recovery may be replicable—but aspiring communities, institutions, and private interests elsewhere would be well-advised to draw from it only those elements that would be compatible with their own unique strengths and circumstances. Everything Dayton is

doing appears to be working very well, and many of the features of its efforts would presumably fit in anywhere. But undergirding the Dayton/Sinclair effort are several strengths other jurisdictions may not always share. Among these are dynamic, hands-on leadership, a strong political will to offer dropouts a shot at a better life, largely cooperative and generous business interests, and powerful institutional backing from a venturesome, thoroughly respected community college.

Statistics of achievement are extremely important in efforts such as dropout recovery; successful programs must present a formidable lineup of them in describing and promoting their work. What may ultimately distinguish Dayton/Sinclair's effort from the rest, however eye-catching their numbers may be, is the character and depth of its leadership, both on and behind the scene. Dayton benefits from a seldom-seen blend of cross-jurisdictional expertise, political skills, and will, unquestioning commitment across the board, and genuine empathy for a largely overlooked population of young Americans. Underlying these pluses is a program-wide insistence that dropout recovery can help make better communities.

### Contact Information

For more information about the Montgomery County Out-of-School Youth Initiative:

**Deborah A. Feldman**, Chair, Out-of-School Youth Task Force  
Montgomery County Administrator  
451 West Third St., P.O. Box 972  
Dayton, OH 45422-1100  
937-225-4693  
feldmand@mcoho.org

For more information about the Sinclair Fast Forward Center:

**Michael Carter**, Director  
Sinclair Fast Forward Center  
1133 South Edwin C. Moses Blvd.  
Suite 170  
Dayton, OH 45408  
937-512-3278  
Michael.carter@sinclair.edu  
www.sinclair.edu/organizations/ffc/index.cfm



For more information about Improved Solutions for Urban Systems:

**Ann Higdon**, President  
Improved Solutions for Urban Systems  
140 N. Keowee Street  
Dayton, OH 45402  
937-223-2323  
ahigdon@isusinc.com  
www.isusinc.com

For more information about Mound Street Academies:

**Sue Garretson**, Superintendent  
Mound Street Academies  
354 Mound Street  
Dayton, OH 45402-8325  
937-223-3041  
sgarretson@moundstreet.k12.oh.us  
www.moundstreet.k12.oh.us

For more information about the Dayton Life Skills Center:

**James Brown**, Director  
Life Skills Center  
1721 N. Main Street  
Dayton, OH 45405  
937-274-2841  
james.brown@lifeskillscenters.com  
www.lifeskillscenters.com

---

<sup>1</sup> In Ohio, charter schools are called “community schools,” but for purposes of continuity in this publication we use the term “charter.”

## Recommendations: Building on Strength

**M**ost of today's high school students enjoy many advantages by virtue of their birth into stable families that offer multiple opportunities for positive personal and social development, and educational backgrounds in which quality instruction is paramount, at least in the early grades. On the other hand, most of the youth served by the programs profiled in this report have not enjoyed the advantages enjoyed by students in America's best-performing high schools. Therefore, our criteria for judging program effectiveness include the value added not only in academic achievement but in personal and social development as well. The key questions we have sought to answer are:

- *Do the schools and community programs profiled here help youth and young adults see themselves as successful learners?*
- *Do they support the positive development of youth who have previously experienced school failure?*
- *Do they move out-of-school and disconnected youth into a position where they can better compete for good jobs with decent wages that can support a family?*
- *Do they offer learners the tools to cope with a rapidly changing economy and to take advantage of opportunities to continue their education beyond high school?*
- *Do they help their graduates avoid self-destructive and antisocial behaviors?*
- *Do graduates understand and exercise their responsibilities, not only as good workers and parents, but also as citizens in a democratic society?*

Fair-minded observers of local and national dropout recovery programs will conclude from this report that laudable work is occurring across the nation to reclaim out-of-school youth. Expertise and experience in this field have been accumulating for over 25 years (40 in the case of the Job Corps). Policymakers can be reasonably confident that, when

given society's mandate and adequate resources to reconnect out-of-school youth and help them become productive and responsible citizens, committed leadership can, in fact, do the job—and do it well.

In short, we believe that efforts of the type reviewed here merit the encouragement and support of the American people. If we are to be the kind of society envisioned in America's founding documents, a City on the Hill, we have much work to do, especially for and with the young people who are disconnected from America's mainstream.

As successful practitioners of dropout recovery consistently tell us, there is no large-scale formula or singular program model for recovering the literally millions of out-of-school youth who could profit from intelligent and sustained social policy for children and youth. However, there are actions we could take which would make a big difference to young people, their communities, the economy, and the nation's sense of social well-being.

Our recommendations build on the many strengths of the current dropout recovery field. They are not particularly expensive, though a number do require a larger public investment in youth. Implementing them would save American taxpayers many times the price we now pay for our national neglect of America's disconnected youth.

### Recommendations

**Policymakers at all levels of government should use both the bully pulpit and innovative legislation to achieve solid recognition that dropout recovery is an integral and essential dimension of school reform.**

As many of the sites profiled in *Whatever It Takes* demonstrate, public schools can mount effective and innovative measures if they embrace the notion that they have the moral responsibility to serve all of their community's young people and undereducated adults. Obviously, accepting this responsibility means that the public at large, as well as local and state governments, must be willing to underwrite the increased cost of educating all of our young people. We believe they will do so when they appreciate the beneficial results, including major economic gains, flowing from effective recovery programs. (We refer again to the data on pages vii-ix

for a reminder of the astounding costs to society of failing to embrace all our young people.)

**School boards, superintendents, principals and other education leaders should take greater responsibility for all of their community’s young people, including dropouts and other disconnected youth.** The current models for standards-based high school reform assume that what works well for the one-third of students who are well-prepared for college will succeed for the two-thirds majority. This is patently not the case. School leaders would do well to learn from alternative educators about what works for students who are not on the college track when they enter 9th grade and then implement the changes necessary to reduce the number of young people dropping out of school. To meet the needs of diverse learners, both those in school and those who have left it, districts should work to create a portfolio of high school options embracing:

- multiple pathways to a recognized credential;
- programs offering open-entry and open-exit;
- compressed and expanded high school programs combined with dual enrollment in postsecondary institutions;
- programs to recover or make up missing academic credits;
- programs offering schedule flexibility, including evening and year-round schools;
- programs offering career-oriented curricula, with opportunities for students to engage in school-related internships and part-time employment; and
- adult high schools, especially the well-regarded daylight/twilight model, with opportunities for intergenerational learning.

In opening these options to their students, school districts should explore and deepen collaboration with existing youth-serving organizations in their communities, as many of the districts profiled in this report are doing with considerable success.

**States should encourage the development of alternative education pathways.** States can facilitate the development of alternative education pathways, which reduce the number of students dropping out of school, while providing well-lit reentry points for those who do leave school before obtaining a diploma. This can be done through legislation that, for example:

- provides uniform measures of dropouts and student tracking mechanisms,
- mandates that districts provide alternative educa-

tion options and engage in dropout recovery,

- allows districts the flexibility to award credit toward graduation based on demonstrated competency, not just “seat time,” and
- lays out a system for funds to follow students into alternative public education settings, including schools run by community-based organizations, community colleges, and charter schools.

Improving flexibility in funding programs that target struggling students and those who have already dropped out of school can be complicated. Such flexibility is crucial, however, to reducing barriers to stable funding for quality education options and alternative pathways to a high school diploma.

**Build on the demonstrated success of long-established national dropout recovery programs.** Expand the National Guard Youth Challenge program, currently in 25 states, and Jobs for America’s Graduates, currently in 29 states, to all 50 states and every territory. Similarly, at least double, over a five-year period, the capacity of YouthBuild, Youth Service and Conservation Corps, and OIC programs, particularly in those communities with the greatest incidence of youth dropping out of school. Expand the Job Corps, over a five- to ten-year period, from its current 122 centers to at least meeting the demand by states and localities for an additional 25 Job Corps centers.

**The Federal Government should re-establish a dedicated federal funding stream for community-wide planning and services for out-of-school youth.** This would be analogous to the former Youth Opportunities Grant Program, which did so much to encourage community collaboration on behalf of out-of-school youth. (See Chapter 19.) The YO Program resulted in tangible, long-term benefits for young people, but its ambitious concept needed more than three or four years to strike deep roots.

**State and federal funds should be used to encourage community college involvement in reconnecting out-of-school youth.** Community colleges hold great attraction and promise, particularly for older, out-of-school youth who seek ways to enter or reenter the worlds of education and employment. To encourage community colleges to participate in public school and CBO partnerships and intermediaries aimed at reconnecting out-of-school youth, state and federal funds should be made available to the colleges to extend their outreach and student counseling efforts.

**Congress should expand funding for the federal Adult Education and Family Literacy Act.** This will make it possible for youth who cannot participate in full-time dropout reconnection programs to partake of adult basic education and secondary school literacy programs in their local public schools, libraries, and community organizations. With the states' matching fund contributions, this is an admirable way to expand this well-functioning partnership which now serves over one million youth annually.

**Funders should develop demonstration projects offering stipends or other financial incentives to increase student attendance, high performance, graduation, and continuing education so that students can devote their best efforts to learning and not be deflected by helping to meet their families' severe economic needs.** Recognizing that most low-income, out-of-school youth desperately need at least modest income support or stipends to stay in and complete their respective programs, most alternative school and program leaders regard this as an extremely high priority.

**Congress should enact and fund the Bush Administration's 2005 proposal amending the Workforce Investment Act to support nationally-competitive challenge grants for out-of-school youth programming.** However, funding for this new approach should be in addition to, not at the expense of, WIA's current youth funding for both in-school and out-of-school education and employment training programs. The ability of local workforce investment boards to allocate their WIA youth funds as local priorities dictate should not be impaired by setting arbitrary national percentage allocations.

**Funders should help create a learning network to promote opportunities for alternative education providers to advance their professional development. Dropout recovery programs are missing** important opportunities because of their relative insularity. Leaders of these efforts generally operate in a trial-and-error mode, often reinventing the wheel because there is so little communication with others pursuing similar missions. Limited help from national program models is available, for example, from YouthBuild USA and the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps. Many programs clearly benefit from their association with the Washington-based National Youth Employment Coalition and its PEPNet Quality Improvement Awards

process. The Alternative High School Initiative, launched in 2003, also has the potential to support collaboration among alternative educators serving disconnected youth.

Overall, however, we deem it highly lamentable that there are so few vehicles for professional collaboration and learning and networks for expressing common concerns and sharing possible remedies. A learning network of and for alternative education providers is urgently needed to:

- support interchange among education providers, allowing them to leverage the expertise of strong existing recovery programs to improve their own effectiveness, and
- enable established dropout recovery efforts to provide technical assistance to those just beginning to address the issue in their communities.

Additionally, we recommend that funders develop an *Annual Dropout Recovery Leader's Award* to recognize quality and innovation and enable selected Leader programs to host and assist visitors from potential new initiatives elsewhere.

**High school reform efforts at the local level should include the leaders of alternative education and those working to increase public knowledge of dropout prevention and recovery.** Many of the schools and programs we profiled say that they are generally excluded from mainstream and official discussions of high school reform. Even principals of highly successful alternative schools within public school districts regret not being asked to sit at the high school reform table in their districts. Yet, these are the people and the places that have been successful with the youth least likely to succeed in traditional high schools. They have much to teach traditional high schools, not only about how to reengage disconnected youth, but also about what can be done to get it right the first time with students at risk of dropping out.



These tasks are urgent. The time is now. How much longer will America tolerate the scandal of a young person dropping out every nine seconds? If we do not act, what will the America of our children's generation look like? And how will we, ourselves, look back and reflect on how well we have discharged our responsibility to our fellow human beings in distress?