Community-Wide Systems That Promote High School Completion

By Rhonda Tsoi-A-Fatt, M.A., and Linda Harris, M.S.

In communities across our nation, thousands of students make the difficult decision to drop out of high school every single day. For most of these youth, the decision stems from academic struggles. The majority of students drop out at the end of 9th grade, after having experienced several years of difficulty in school (Balfanz & Lotters, 2006). By the end of 12th grade, only about 70% of those who started will graduate with a high school diploma (Orfield et al., 2004). For African American and Latino youth, the numbers arenumbing—only half of them walk across the stage and receive a diploma (Orfield et al., 2004). Without intervention, those who don’t finish high school often experience sporadic employment and low wages, are more likely to engage in criminal activity, and, ultimately, are unable to support themselves and their families. As a result, a community suffers a terrible loss when its youth are uneducated.

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Schools cannot tackle the dropout problem alone, particularly in high-poverty communities where the magnitude of the problem looms large. The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is committed to advancing cross-system solutions which, when administered at sufficient scale in communities, promote the healthy development of all youth, keep them connected to school, and place them on the path to high school graduation and successful lives. This article explores the need for a community-wide approach to support dropout prevention for struggling youth and re-engagement of disconnected youth.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND SCHOOL COMPLETION

Youth develop across multiple domains that are relevant to academic success. While schools focus primarily on cognitive development, the concurrent physical and social/emotional development, career skills, and sense of ethnic identity and civic responsibility are critical. Many of the supports young people receive in these other developmental areas come from community-based out-of-school programming. Research shows that the stimulation of development in these additional key areas builds skills that support connections to school and achievement. Appropriate social/emotional development leads to increased self-esteem, a more positive attitude about school, increased academic achievement, and reduced problem behaviors (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). Positive ethnic identity development is tied to increased confidence about self-efficacy, as well as increased conflict resolution skills (Phinney, 1989). Development of a young person’s sense of civic responsibility leads to increased engagement in school and improved attitudes toward others (Michelsen et al., 2002). Youth who have gained career skills have increased school attendance, reduced criminal behavior, and increased postsecondary participation (Jekielek et al., 2002). Thus, the role of community organizations in keeping youth connected to school and on a path to lifelong success cannot be overstated.

Creating a Community Continuum of Support

Within communities, there are several youth-serving systems (e.g., school districts, departments of children/youth services, departments of labor, departments of parks and recreation) and community-based organizations (e.g., local after-school programs, Boys & Girls clubs, YMCAs, Big/Brother Big Sister programs) that provide quality programming and services for youth to address several developmental domains related to school completion. For some of the community’s most vulnerable youth, programming and services may also be available through systems that serve special populations, such as child welfare, juvenile justice, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). However, even with these supports many communities still struggle with significant amounts of their youth populations dropping out of school. There are several reasons for this. First, in many communities, these services are provided in a fragmented manner, under the jurisdiction of individual departments and organizations, with little communication or collaboration. Thus, the ability for community-wide support for educational outcomes is limited. Ideally, schools, youth-serving systems, and community-based organizations should be working together to ensure that the community has a balanced portfolio of activities and services available to support the healthy development of all youth, and to help facilitate their academic growth and maintain or restore their connections to education. Second, the resources available to be spent on these types of activities fall short of the vast need in many communities. This is compounded by the fact that the level of resources dramatically decreases after youth leave elementary school.
school or are around 13 years of age. Creating the necessary community-wide support for youth will require the connection of resources, expertise, and services across a community.

The challenge for communities is to create a system of service provision which galvanizes all community players under a common vision for its youth, ensures that opportunities are available at sufficient scale such that all youth have access to necessary programming and services, removes barriers to youth participation, and creates supports that are robust enough to make a difference in the lives of even the most vulnerable youth. The planning process to get there is not an easy one, as it means stakeholders must be willing to think differently about youth and in their communities, to consider more systemic approaches to the problem of dropouts, and to define their active role in the solution. CLASP helps communities to think about how to engage in this level of planning and chronicles the successes of some communities (see Boxes 3.1 and 3.2 for two community profiles). In our work, we have found that to be successful, the community planning process should include four key elements (Tsoi-A-Fatt, 2008):

- **Committed Leadership** – Powerful champions such as elected officials to issue the “call to action” for the community to step out and create a new reality for its youth

- **Quality Stewardship** – Some entity that will be responsible for facilitating the planning process—both strategic and action planning—and assuring the continued momentum of this collaborative community process

- **Informed Decision Making** – An understanding of the dimensions of the community’s youth issues through gathering and use of data on current youth outcomes and risks to youth development

- **Collective Accountability** – Benchmarks to gauge success, and realistic performance measures and indicators by which to evaluate programs and partnerships

**COMMUNITY CHALLENGES IN SUPPORTING YOUTH**

Community leaders face many challenges as they work to implement a continuum of services at sufficient scale such that they can appropriately support all youth who desire services. In October 2008, CLASP convened a group of representatives from the mayor’s offices of eight communities (Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Memphis, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Portland, Oregon) to discuss the challenges they face as they work collaboratively on developing a systemic approach to youth programming in their communities. Represented in the group were key advisers to the mayors in the areas of youth development, education, gang violence, and youth employment. The most salient issues raised by that group follow (Tsoi-A-Fatt, 2009).

**Resources & Sustainability**

The financial resources to adequately serve middle school and high school youth are lacking. There are gaps in the resource stream, and there is too little dedicated investment in communities to plan and program for older youth. This is particularly true when attempting to provide services to youth who have already dropped out of school and are seeking a path back.

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Lack of funding has a tremendous effect on the sustainability of quality youth programming. Much of a community’s youth development programming is grant-based; when grants run out, great programs are often shut down. Some youth-serving systems identify ways of sharing financial resources to maximize the number of youth served. This, however, takes significant negotiation since the various federally-run programs do not have uniform eligibility requirements for participation. Guidance from federal agencies, or examples of what is possible from the experiences of other communities would be helpful.

**Shifting Demographics**

Many communities are experiencing shifts in neighborhood populations due to issues such as immigration and gentrification. As the demographics of a neighborhood change, the needs of the youth and families residing there change as well. Thus, the programming and services must be constantly assessed to assure they are meeting current needs. Community-based organizations are often dedicated to a particular neighborhood or mission, and are sometimes resistant to shifting their focus. Organizations must be flexible and current, otherwise their services may not suit the new community needs. One specific example of the challenge of shifting demographics is that of increased immigrant populations in particular neighborhoods. Programs may encounter difficulty serving immigrant youth who lack the requisite documentation. Finding ways to work through these documentation issues becomes a significant addition to the work of youth organizations.

**Data Sharing**

The sharing of data between systems to inform planning and service provision is often a difficult task. Communities struggle to work within the boundaries of data privacy laws while they attempt to adequately share data to advance their efforts at systemic programming and engagement of youth. Communities need access to many types of data in order to evaluate multiple dimensions of their work to create a continuum of support. Examples include: data which tracks the demographics of the youth participating in specific activities, unique identifiers to track youth participation in multiple activities, and outcomes for youth over time. This allows communities to evaluate program saturation across the community, gaps in services for particular populations, outcomes for youth, and estimate the actual necessary expenditure per young person.

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**Box 3.1 Chicago Out-of-School Time Project**

The City of Chicago’s Out-of-School Time Project is a partnership between the Department of Children and Youth Services, After School Matters, Chicago Public Schools, The Chicago Park District, and the Chicago Public Library. The Project aims to strengthen the Chicago system of after-school supports by pursuing four key strategies:

- Increase coordination, access, and reach of quality programming by creating a citywide program and participant database that can be shared across agencies and program providers (launched September 2008, www.afterschoolchicago.org)
- Increase teen participation through a citywide communications initiative
- Establish citywide common definitions of after-school program quality and increase supports for continuous improvement of program quality
- Continually build support and readiness for achieving sustainable, coordinated and dedicated funding

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Governance
At the federal level, the field of youth development does not have one “home.” There are a number of agencies, each serving a segment of the youth population, but no place where all youth issues reside. This lack of cohesion trickles down to all levels of government and creates fragmented service provision and planning. One example of this fragmented mindset is in the funding processes for federal dollars. Often, the requirements for these funds are prescribed models or designated to a very specific sub-population, the result being that the collaborative planning process for a continuum of services is undermined.

Making It a Reality: Implications for Policy and Practice

There are key changes that can be made in local policy and “on the ground” practice which address these community challenges and make comprehensive continuums of support for youth a reality. Communities can address some of these issues in their local planning and implementation.

1. Consider sustainability from the very beginning of the planning process

It is important to create a collective vision and agenda for action, and for all partners to dedicate resources to accomplish that vision. This means attracting new resources or directing existing resources in new ways. There must be formal agreements between systems regarding partnerships and resource sharing, and stakeholders must advocate for legislation that expands the delivery of youth development services and work. Make the case for increased resources to effectively serve the youth population through assessing the current supply/demand ratio for services in the community. One key to sustainability is assuring that there are champions within the major systems and sectors who support the collaborative practices which result from the planning process, and that those practices become an accepted way of doing business.

2. Tailor programming to address the community’s most vulnerable youth

Put vulnerable youth as the focal point for strategic intervention and shift the emphasis from individual programmatic efforts to collective efforts that can positively impact the overall life outcomes for these youth in the community. Assess the needs of the youth population, then work together to understand the necessary shift in programming and the amount of youth who will need to benefit. Target resources based on the identified needs. Be attentive to the impact of broader community changes on the youth population. Work with community-based organizations to retrofit their operations to address the new priorities. Encourage agency heads to align program requirements and streamline the oversight procedures to support more integrated service delivery.

3. Share data to make more substantive decisions about service delivery to youth

Making resource decisions that are grounded in solid data analysis is critical to creating public will, assuring quality programming, establishing credibility, setting goals, and monitoring progress. The first step in data sharing is to engender trust between youth-serving systems in order to begin breaking down the barriers to sharing data. Once trust is established, brainstorm what data would be beneficial to share across programs or services, and clearly identify how it would improve services for youth. Seek clarification on data privacy laws from a policy expert to understand the possibilities. Look for examples of data sharing already happening between other systems in your community, or in other communities. Solidify the sharing of data with formal agreements on the permissible uses of data, and maintenance of high-quality databases. Assure parents and youth that all data sharing is done with attentiveness to privacy, and that any information they share will not be compromised or used to their detriment.

4. Remain true to the community vision

The creation of a continuum of support is not a process with a beginning and an end. Rather, it is an ideological shift and ongoing commitment to the vision of a brighter future for a community’s youth. After completing the initial planning and implementation process, it is important to revisit the vision on a regular basis. While specific strategies for achieving the vision may change over time, the vision itself should remain. Determine if existing strategies and programs are accomplishing their intended goals, and make adjustments accordingly. Be selective about new initiatives being introduced in the community. Create a process to evaluate how the initiative complements the community agenda for a comprehensive youth strategy. Determine if the community infrastructure is sufficient to make the particular model a viable option.

5. Critical role of continued advocacy

Communities ought to be a voice for change on issues affecting outcomes for youth such as education reform, funding for after-school/out-of-school activities, youth employment opportunities, and juvenile justice reform. The message from communities should paint the picture of youth distress in local context, highlight examples of effective practices which could be expanded with increased resources, stress the cost of doing nothing, and propose solutions that are grounded in the day-to-day reality of creating and managing a community-wide support structure for youth.

Box 3.2
Philadelphia’s Project U-Turn

Project U-Turn is a citywide campaign to focus public attention on Philadelphia’s dropout crisis and to design strategies and leverage investments to resolve it. The U-Turn campaign is led by a citywide collaborative whose members include representatives of the school district, city agencies, foundations, youth-serving organizations, parents, and young people themselves. The collaborative is managed by the Philadelphia Youth Network and is committed to improving educational opportunities for struggling students and out-of-school youth. In the last three years, the City of Philadelphia’s graduation rate has increased by 10%, and more than 1600 out-of-school youth were referred to educational options (Project U-Turn, 2009).
CONCLUSION

In communities across our country, young people are dropping out of school every day. Absent intervention, their life prospects are pretty bleak, and there is no one system or resource stream that is charged with the responsibility of putting these youth back on track. Creating a new reality for these youth, one that delivers them to a future of hope and opportunity, will require the collaborative effort of all youth-serving systems and all those working on the ground with young people each day. Communities will have to take steps to revamp their current systems and policies to embrace youth with a continuum of services and supports that shield the youth from the risks associated with dropping out of school. To get there, communities need to catalyze youth-serving entities to work together to create a new vision for youth—one in which youth are inspired to remain connected to educational opportunities or are reconnected to the opportunities that will help them to get their lives back on the right track. When all community stakeholders believe in this vision, a community will be positioned to significantly improve life outcomes for its youth.

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