

Developing Youth Systems: Creating Transformational Change for our Nation's Young People

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There is a high school dropout crisis in America. Approximately one-quarter of young people fail to complete high school on-time, if ever.ⁱ

The number rises to a shocking 40 percent in the nation's urban school districts.ⁱⁱ Too often, these youth endure resource-poor surroundings marked by low-performing schools, community-wide violence, illegal drug use, and overall social disorganization;ⁱⁱⁱ environments that create toxic stress, negatively impacting a young person's development.^{iv} Such adverse settings provide young people with few opportunities to participate in enriching out-of-school-time activities and to experience academic and social supports from caring, nurturing adults.^v These shortfalls in communities begin to have detrimental effect on young people well before they reach adolescence, starting in the womb, persisting throughout the first two decades of growing up, and often throughout their lives.^{vi}

Too often, efforts to meet these challenges have focused solely on school reform and improvement to produce better opportunities and outcomes for children and youth. Good schools are, of course, essential, but not alone sufficient for the long-term academic, economic, and civic success of our nation's young people.^{vii} Rather, an integrated set of supports is needed in families, in all facets of communities, and, yes, in schools. Research, community wisdom, and common sense tell us that families, schools and the broader community need to work together to create integrated systems of support for each child—^{viii} an approach that we term youth systems.

YOUTH SYSTEMS

A COMPREHENSIVE, INTEGRATED APPROACH TO CHILD AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT.

Deeply influenced by the fields of developmental science, economics, and public health, a youth system encompasses key developmental supports (what America's Promise calls the Five Promises 1) integrated across families, schools, and all facets of the community, aligned with the strengths and needs of each child.^{ix}

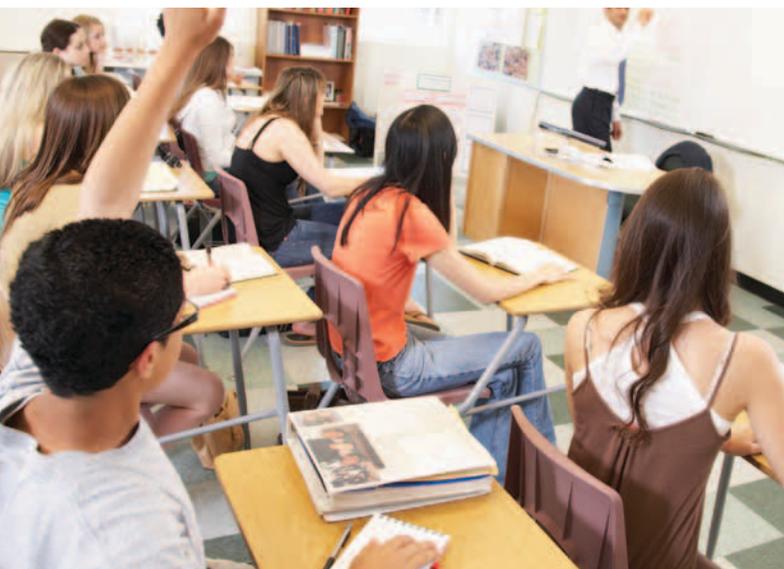
A YOUTH SYSTEM:

1. Places the needs and strengths of youth and their families at the center of strategies instead of focusing on “reforming” or “fixing” institutions
2. Recognizes and encourages the agency of youth and their families in deciding what is best and most viable for their familial situation.
3. Acknowledges the multiple contexts within which youth develop and aligning supports across these contexts
4. Includes informal developmental contexts, such as the culture of a neighborhood or the power of peer influences, in addition to increasing the quantity and quality of formal institutions, such as youth development organizations, schools, and social services.
5. Commits to youth across the first two decades of life and aligning supports across developmental transitions.

Numerous empirical studies show that when young people experience these key developmental supports throughout the first two decades of life, they are more likely to achieve positive developmental outcomes: higher rates of academic achievement, civic engagement, and prosocial behavior and lower rates of incarceration and teen parenthood.

Indeed, Nobel Prize winning economist, James Heckman, and colleagues have found that consistently providing supports throughout the first decades is related to high school graduation rates exceeding 90 percent for economically disadvantaged young people.^{xi}

Providing intermittent supports over time is not sufficient. Instead, investing in young people early, and maintaining that support over time is especially critical for young people’s academic and social trajectories. For example, research has identified remarkable, long-term gains in young people’s educational, physical, psychological, and labor-market outcomes after participation in early childhood programs.^{xii} Gains from early investments are further optimized when followed up with continued investments.^{xiii} Moreover, programs that facilitate transitions into middle school and high school, such as Citizen Schools, have significant impacts on long-term academic and socioemotional outcomes.^{xiv} The key idea is that young people need consistency of supports



within and across time periods. This can be achieved through aligning multiple programs, engaging in long-term programs, and/or young people experiencing developmental supports in all aspects of their lives: family, schools, places of worship, and throughout the community.

Importantly, a youth system is different than just putting more (and even better) programs into a community. The “more” approach typically results in a few young people gaining access to a new resource or support. But too few young people experience the full array of developmental supports they need. At best, communities see modest positive effects when more significant change is envisioned. This would be like putting a new engine in a car, but leaving the transmission and wheels untouched. In contrast, a youth system aligns developmental supports to the needs and strengths of each young person, positioning the young people to achieve positive academic, social, and civic outcomes.

DEVELOPING YOUTH SYSTEMS

Youth systems are created in various ways. For instance, parents might move to a certain neighborhood, because of the high quality schools. They would then find the various supports in their community, such as arts programs, sports programs, or academic tutoring, that they believe their children need. Thus, parents with resources end up putting their children into environments in which healthy youth systems already exist – all they have to do is plug in. Not all parents have similar opportunities to create a youth system for their child. A community might not have the human and institutional capacity to support their young people or the parents might not be able to overcome the extreme barriers presented by poverty in trying to support their children.

To support families in under-resourced communities, comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) have been constructed to strengthen a community’s capacity for supporting children and youth. CCIs emerged in the 1990s as a means for addressing complex problems affecting highly distressed neighborhoods.^{xv} Traditionally, CCIs have employed a place-based approach to focus on issues related to public health, social welfare, housing, education, and community development. Consistent with a youth systems approach, the overarching framework of CCIs is to view “the strands of community life as interconnected and interdependent.”^{xvi} Although CCIs often fall into the trap of taking a scattershot approach to providing supports, there are examples of CCIs throughout the nation that have strengthened youth systems by coordinating services, efforts, and practices focused on improving youth outcomes in their communities.

These promising efforts have had a positive impact on the lives of young people and can provide principles to guide communities throughout the country. These efforts include Purpose-Built Communities, and the Promise and Choice Neighborhoods federal initiatives, among others.

YOUTH SYSTEMS IN ACTION

To turn the tide on the high school graduation crisis and transform the lives of youth throughout the country, communities can look toward their peers who have developed strong, positive youth systems.

EAST LAKE

Atlanta, GA

The East Lake Foundation was created in 1995 to take a holistic community revitalization approach to create solutions to the concentrated poverty, high unemployment, academic failure, drug use, and violence within the East Lake neighborhood of Atlanta, GA. This approach included creating new cradle-to-career education programs, along with transforming dilapidated public housing apartments into well-appointed subsidized and market-rate apartments. In addition to a new high quality public charter school and early learning program, a wide variety of enrichment and community wellness activities and programs were developed, including The First Tee program, a state-of-the-art YMCA, and multiple programs to empower parents and serve youth and families across contexts.^{xvii} The young people experience

most, if not all, of these opportunities. These revitalization efforts have kept low-income families in the community while tremendously improving the academic and social outcomes of the youth in the community.^{xviii} For example, as a result of these efforts, proficiency levels in reading and English language arts are outperforming the Georgia and Atlanta Public Schools averages.^{xix}

PARRAMORE KIDZ ZONE

Orlando, FL

The Parramore Kids Zone (PKZ) is a city-led initiative focused on what was the most distressed neighborhood in Orlando. Through the leadership of the mayor's office, collaborative partnerships with youth-serving organizations, and resident and youth engagement, the Parramore neighborhood is beginning to be positively transformed. PKZ provides more than 60 programs from early learning and health programs to youth development and mentoring programs to emergency economic assistance. Each program can take ownership of the success of each individual youth by using a data system that follows youth across programs. A common thread through the programming is building strong relationships with youth and engaging youth as active agents of change in the neighborhood. Since PKZ was launched during the summer of 2006, Parramore has seen an 81% decline in juvenile arrests, 21% decline in the teen birth rate, and grade-level math proficiency among middle school students has increased from 25% to 40%.^{xx}



SELF-ENHANCEMENT, INC.

Portland, OR

Self-Enhancement, Inc. (SEI) is a multi-service organization that focuses on high-risk youth in a geographic area that encompasses eight schools in Portland, OR. Starting in second grade and ...who not only helps them navigate their academic and social lives, but also builds nurturing relationships, taking on the roles of teacher, mentor, and parent. Starting in 2nd grade and continuing through age 25, youth who have been identified by the partner schools as needing additional support are paired with a coordinator who not only helps the young person navigate their academic and social, but also builds nurturing relationships lives, taking on the roles of teacher, mentor, and parent. Together, they construct and implement an Individual Success Plan that creates a roadmap for success that includes SEI support provides in-school and after-school enrichment, summer programming, and college and vocational support. In addition, SEI provides support to parents ranging from counseling and parenting classes to energy and housing assistance. This comprehensive, coordinated approach creates strong youth systems around each young person, resulting in exceptional outcomes. SEI reports that nearly 100% of elementary and middle school students have on-time grade promotion, and 97% of high school students are on track to graduate high school.^{xxi}

CONCLUSION

All young people have the potential to thrive academically, socially, vocationally, and civically. However, not all young people have access to the adequate supports to thrive. These young people tend to be clustered in communities with low performing schools, high rates of violence and drug use, and few youth development programs aligned with their needs. The result can be seen all too clearly in the low academic proficiency and critically low high school graduation rates in those communities.

To change the trajectory for young people, government, non-profits, schools, communities, and individuals need to change the way they do business. School improvement is necessary, but not the only step. Providing more enriching opportunities, more consistent support and higher quality services is yet another step. However, these key supports and opportunities for young people need to be aligned to the needs of strengths of their children and youth. If not, then we can expect the same modest impacts we have been seeing for decades, and the high school dropout crisis will continue.

The power to bring about real change in young people's lives is putting children at the center of planning, integrating programs, services, and supports into a system that is aligned to each child's needs and strengths.^{xxi} Such strategies, as outlined above, have the potential to transform the lives of young people throughout the nation. These strategies are not about more money or programs being thrown at the problem. Yes, funding can support additional slots in programs and program improvement, and some "glue" money could facilitate integration, but much of the foundation for change is in place. The challenge for communities and the nation is to create the will to put the pieces together—to create youth systems for every child.

- ⁱ Stillwell & Sable, 2013; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007.
- ⁱⁱ Swanson, 2009
- ⁱⁱⁱ Sampson & Groves, 1989
- ^{iv} National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005
- ^v Bouffard et al., 2006; Hart et al., 2004
- ^{vi} Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000
- ^{vii} Zaff & Smerdon, 2009
- ^{viii} Zaff & Smerdon, 2009, Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2002; Eccles & Roeser, 2009
- ^{ix} Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Covington & Surrey, 1997; Jensen, 2000; Mistry & Wu, 2010; Pufall & Unsworth, 2004; Rose, 2000
- ^x Benson et al., 2006; Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Leffert & Scales, 2004; Scales et al., 2008
- ^{xi} Cunha & Heckman, 2007
- ^{xii} Campbell et al., 2002; Schweinhart et al., 1993
- ^{xiii} Cunha & Heckman, 2007
- ^{xiv} Aber, Burnley, Cohen et al., 2006; Fabiano, Pearson, Reisner, & Williams, 2006
- ^{xv} Aspen, 2010
- ^{xvi} Aspen, 2010
- ^{xvii} www.purposebuiltcommunities.org
- ^{xviii} Boston, 2005
- ^{xix} Selig Center for Economic Growth, 2008
- ^{xx} <http://www.cityoforlando.net/elected/parramore/children.htm>
- ^{xxi} <http://www.selfenhancement.org>
- ^{xxii} Bathgate, Colvin & Silva, 2011