



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

CREATING STRATEGIES
for Educational and Economic Opportunity

Early Lessons from Strategic Assessment Initiative of the Youth Transition Funders Group

June 2005

Introduction

In 2002, a group of local, regional, and national philanthropies came together as the Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) with the goal of working in partnership on behalf of disconnected youth and young adults. Because so many young people are not getting the high-quality educational opportunities that are so central to successful life trajectories, one of the YTFG working groups is focused on Struggling Students and Out of School Youth (SS/OSY).

In January 2005, in recognition of both the magnitude of the current dropout/push-out crisis in our cities and the need for dramatic and innovative responses, the SS/OSY Workgroup launched the Strategic Assessment Initiative in five cities: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, OR, and San Jose. The goal of the Initiative is to help cities in their efforts to move from piecemeal to systemic approaches to improving options and outcomes for struggling students and out-of-school youth and to gain national visibility for this important systemic work.

The Strategic Assessment Initiative rests on the premise that the types of systemic programmatic and policy change required to reconnect disengaged youth to quality learning options call for a collaboration of key public and community stakeholders from the educational, municipal, and public care sectors. Another central premise is that community organizing/engagement is critical to link the local partnership to the concerns of low-income and minority communities most directly impacted by the persistent race and class inequities in education and career outcomes for young people.

The framework for the Strategic Assessment Initiative asked sites to assess their progress to date and identify future action in four key areas:

- Improving the capacity to gather, examine, and use data to help inform and guide efforts to improve outcomes for struggling students/out-of-school youth;
- Increasing the investment in and supply of quality educational options for these youth;
- Assessing the policy/funding environment at the local and state level to target policy barriers that impede improved options and outcomes for these youth; and
- Building relationships among and mobilizing support of key stakeholders.

YTFG Initiative Offers a “Critical Missing Element” for Expanding Options for SS/OSY

1. Strategies for Moving from Piecemeal to Systemic Solutions

The SS/OSY workgroup decided to focus collective resources on a small number of cities that had already begun to address the educational and social needs of the struggling students and out-of-school youth in their communities. The workgroup was making a collective “bet” that the existence of actual places with an emerging *system* of educational options, supports, and opportunities for struggling students and out-of-school youth would help advance work at both the program and policy levels.

In the last few months, the potential importance of identifying such existence proofs has become increasingly evident. The High School Summit, coordinated by the National Governors Association and Achieve; the Action Agenda published by these same organizations; and the selection of Honor States by the NGA and supported by various members of the SS/OSY Workgroup is helping to drive the attention of Governors to the inadequacies of high schools in serving particular populations of youth. Low high school graduation rates are increasingly being used as both a central reason states need to focus on and do something about their high schools, and they are proposed as one of the key measures of whether reform is working.

Early work on the ground suggests that the YTFG initiative can add a critical missing element by highlighting key strategies that a set of major cities are using to move from piecemeal to systemic solutions in addressing the education and social needs of older, marginalized youth.

Report from the Field: Accelerating Systems Change and Targeting Policies

Cities have begun to leverage the YTFG initiative to embed strategies for serving struggling students and out-of-school youth in broader system reform initiatives, both inside and/or outside of the school department:

- New York City and Philadelphia are expanding options for struggling students and out-of-school youth through a new Request For Proposals (RFP) that reflects and draws on the work of the partnerships and provides new opportunities for inside/outside partners to collaborate. Capitalizing on the Mayor’s commitment of funds to and recognition of older, out-of-school youth, the N.Y.C. Department of Education issued an RFP that represents sustainable public investment in diploma-granting options for overage/undercredited/out-of-school youth and, specifically, in community-based organizations to provide a range of academic, youth development and career development services within these programs. As a result of the YTFG initiative elevating the importance of cross-sector collaboration in serving SS/OSY, the Philadelphia School Department recently invited youth-serving municipal and nonprofit organizations that are members of the YTFG partnership to co-design its RFP for new diploma-granting options for overage youth. These organizations are now designing a second RFP that leverages federal/state/municipal dollars for wrap-around services in these schools.
- In Portland and Boston, where the YTFG partnership includes key leaders of networks of community-based alternative schools/programs, these leaders have leveraged resources and opportunities to tackle challenging quality, accountability, and funding issues. With the goal of positioning their programming as viable options within an emerging portfolio of small schools, these leaders are strategizing with district leaders to align community-based programming with the unfolding high school reform agendas.

- In San Jose, the YTFG partnership is working to coordinate alternative education services split across multiple high school districts and between the districts in the city and county. The partnership has begun work on coordinating data systems to better track which and how many students are getting lost between the cracks, mapping available education options and demonstrating the gap between supply and demand.

YTFG partnerships are developing strategies to move policy in directions required to improve outcomes for SS/OSY.

- In Portland, the Coalition of Metro-Area Community Schools (CMACS) is working with local and state leaders to help shape policy around accountability for alternatives, especially in regards to how retention and completion rates are measured, reported, and used to guide practice and policy.
- In Philadelphia, the School Department is looking to the rich data emerging from the YTFG partnership to inform and shape policy on new school and service development for SS/OSY. The dataset being developed integrates school-district information with multiple other sources, such as juvenile justice, foster care, homelessness, vital statistics, etc., to paint a comprehensive picture of the scale and characteristics of the OSY population. Of particular interest will be information such as credit accumulation.
- In collaboration with the San Jose Mayor's initiative on high school reform, the YTFG partnership has developed a policy team that is surfacing barriers to alternative education. The policy team is focusing its immediate efforts on developing legislation that addresses the inequity in funding that penalizes charter schools serving SS/OSY; new legislation will seek funding formulas based on the students served rather than the provider.

2. Cross-Sector Focus on Expanding Options for SS/OSY

Another early decision of the SS/OSY Workgroup was to frame the initiative as “strategic assessment”—a stake in the ground between planning and implementation. Carrying out a strategic assessment process at the systemic level requires skillful leadership of a cross-sector partnership—in other words, staffing and sustaining the partnership would be essential for sites to advance their efforts to increase educational outcomes for SS/OSY. The hope was that sites that were already mobilizing across sectors around issues related to struggling students and out-of-school youth would make use of strategic assessment (and of the specific four-part framework provided by the RFP) as a wedge opportunity to take action on longstanding concerns about educational inequities, and to do so in a coherent way.

Reports from the field indicate that the partnerships leading the work in the sites are using the assessment process and four-part framework to advance systemic reform and raise the stakes for community involvement in improving educational outcomes for vulnerable youth. In each of the sites, the YTFG partnership is adapting the process to their the local context, and using it to develop some long-term targets/goals, while continuing to move forward on specific actions in critical strategic areas.

Report from the Field: Cultivating Stakeholder Attention and Community Involvement

The YTFG strategic assessment process has already helped to leverage attention of key stakeholders/funders to expanding educational options for SS/OSY:

- In Boston, the strategic assessment process (and an Op Ed in *The Boston Globe*) heightened the attention of the School Committee to SS/OSY and helped spur a collaboration between the school department and the YTFG partnership on using data to better understand the dropout issue and possible solutions.
- The Oregon Community Foundation, an active member of Portland's YTFG partnership, has begun to identify donors likely to have an interest in supporting initiatives for SS/OSY and is planning efforts to inform donors about the challenges facing this group of young people.
- In San Jose, the demands of parents and youth for quality alternative education has brought the County Superintendent, County Board of Education, and District Superintendents to the table, and these stakeholders have begun to take steps to acknowledge responsibility for increasing the quality and quantity of alternative education slots for youth in San Jose.

In all five sites, the partnership has become the central vehicle for advancing the aims of the strategic assessment process and expanding the work to the broader community. Partnerships provide:

- Support and political cover for and pressure on key stakeholders and policymakers to support the agenda;
- A forum for working out knotty policy, practice, and theory of change issues across systems and sectors that touch this population;
- Opportunities for cross-system learning, information-sharing, relationship building, and collaboration;
- A means for bringing community and youth voice to the conversation/decisions, increasing the likelihood that the changes will have the support of the broader community and therefore policymakers;
- A vehicle for leveraging community support and local funding to sustain the long-term efforts for developing and maintaining educational opportunities for SS/OSY.

Taking Advantage of a Moment of Opportunity

The growing interest in high schools at the federal, state, and district levels and the growing attention to graduation and dropout rates as a measure of high school effectiveness offer a moment of opportunity to influence state and district action and policy concerning educational opportunity for disconnected youth. As state and district leaders search for systemic solutions, the Strategic Assessment Initiative cities are well poised to provide exemplars of citywide collaborative approaches. In the partnerships they have created, the YTFG cities have established a vehicle for keeping the particular challenges related to struggling students and out-of-school youth more in the center of the work—whether that work be the creation of small schools, district redesign, or quality out-of-school time programming.

It is too soon to know specifically what each site will propose as critical next steps. However, it is possible to identify key areas of activity emerging in one or more sites that will offer potential leverage opportunities (see box). In examining the types of systemic reforms these cities are making, or finding that they have to make in order to serve this population of young people, it will be possible to build out a clearer agenda of what state and local policymakers can and need to do to address barriers to local activity and to create the impetus for more activity at the local level where services are delivered.

As states begin to design and roll out their reform plans and the federal and state governments take increasing interest in systemic approaches to re-engaging disconnected youth, the systems work in these cities can serve as examples of the kinds of systemic and intentional effort that need to occur. A visible city approach, resulting in immediate effect on young people's lives, can help get traction on a broader policy and advocacy agenda on behalf of struggling students and out-of-school youth.

Report from the Field: What Sites Are Working Towards

Building on the work of the first year, sites will be in position to:

- Drive attention and resources toward increasing the quantity and quality of educational programming/options for SS/OSY;
- Advocate for policies necessary to support local and state conditions for incubating and sustaining alternative educational options for SS/OSY;
- Develop and pilot accountability measures for assessing the quality of alternative schools/programs consistent with high expectations for student learning and academic/social development needs of SS/OSY;
- Support increasing capacity of community-based organization to serve as partners and/or providers for schools/programs targeted toward SS/OSY;
- Leverage opportunities through high school reform initiatives (or pushing high school reform) to strengthen district responsibility for serving SS/OSY;
- Build and strengthen data systems to highlight gaps in services and drive programming; and
- Strengthen the critical role of community organizations/organizing groups as advocate and external pressure for high school redesign that attends to needs of SS/OSY.