

Disconnected Youth Issue Gains Traction

Three years ago, youth advocates were the only ones talking about the problem of disconnected youth—young people aged 16 – 24 who are not in school and not working. It was not an issue that appeared on policymakers’ radar screens.

In 2006, SCAA began work on [*Growing Up In New York: Charting the Next Generation of Workers, Citizens and Leaders*](#). The “Chartbook” mapped out things like high school graduation by race or ethnicity, programs for children with disabilities, prenatal care for teen mothers, children living in low-income households, and children in foster care. The very last chart showed the number of disconnected youth in New York State, which had risen steadily from 2002 – 2004.

The Chartbook found several themes, including that some children are not being reached and that education, which should be the great equalizer, is falling short. In sum, the Chartbook told a story. It described a state where various systems fail children throughout their lives. SCAA hypothesized that the children described in the charts (children of teen parents; those involved with the child welfare, mental health, or juvenile justice systems; those who fail to read at grade level; those in poverty; etc.) are often the same children. They are failed by multiple systems over time, which results in increased odds of dropping out of school and being unemployed.

In short, we know who these children are. We also know what to do. We must start early and prevent these breakdowns in the child-serving systems.

In 2007, SCAA brought together a work group of state agency representatives and advocates to discuss the problem and possible solutions. The group formulated a number of recommendations.

Prevention Strategies:

- Educate policymakers and the public about the basic science of prevention.
- Develop and adopt a prevention framework.
- Develop and implement a statewide risk and protection survey.
- Focus on public health.
- Increase family supports for the parents and caregivers of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.
- Implement [*The Children’s Plan: Improving the Social and Emotional Well-Being of new York’s Children and Their Families*](#).

Transition Strategies:

- Ensure significant support systems.

- Stress forgiveness over failure.
- Begin transition readiness earlier.
- Re-conceptualize transitions across the life span.
- Empower youth to advocate for themselves.

Education Strategies:

- Invest in mentoring programs.
- Continue investments in and increase promotion of service learning.
- Decrease truancy and deal with truants differently.
- Eliminate education neglect reports.
- Discontinue the use of out-of-school suspension as punishment for youth with behavior problems.
- Decrease the dropout rate.
- Decrease the use of GEDs.
- Support and train teachers and school personnel.

Strategies in Practice:

- Address the family as a whole, not as separate pieces.
- Examine the practice of symptom-reduction versus what is developmentally-appropriate.
- Utilize multiple points of entry.
- Create a Children's Budget.

In October 2007, SCAA released [*Disconnected Youth: An Answer to Preventing Disengagement*](#). The white paper focused on reducing systemic issues in the child welfare and children's mental health systems that could increase the chances of disconnection. In December 2008, SCAA released [*Volume 2*](#), which focused on the education and juvenile justice systems. In the meantime, the Governor's Children's Cabinet and its Advisory Board had taken on the issue and formed a Workgroup on Disconnected Youth. The Office of Children and Families' (OCFS) Education Committee and the Governor's Summit on Student Engagement and Dropout Prevention are also tackling similar and related issues. (More on these initiatives in accompanying articles.)

The state is paying more attention to the issue, as is the nation. President Obama added requirements specific to employing disconnected youth to stimulus plan language. In June 2009, SCAA addressed the issue of re-connecting youth to education and employment in [*Back on Track*](#). The release of that white paper was accompanied by a panel discussion in Albany that included presentations by the Hillside Family of Agencies in Monroe County and The Door in New York City. Both programs are stellar examples of how to engage, encourage, and support young people as they renegotiate their goals.

Today, we've come a long way from where we started in our disconnected youth discussions. Recently, the SCAA work group met to hear presentations from the Department of Health on teen sexual health and from the SUNY School of Social Welfare on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Making these connections was important. Teen pregnancy is a contributing factor to high school dropout, which often leads to disconnection. ACEs often lead to risky behavior such as drug use, another factor.

Failure to achieve postsecondary success also has a negative impact. There are currently more than 2.8 million working-age young adults and adults in New York State without a high school diploma. In 2008, 57,000 of those took the GED and 31,075 passed it. Yet only 7,100 entered college and a staggeringly low number—2,000—are expected to graduate or remain in college after six years. A soon-to-be released white paper by SCAA, *Getting Serious About the GED: How New York Can Build a Bridge from High School Dropout to Postsecondary Success*, will examine how the state can improve GED pass rates and increase its support of GED attainers as they continue their education.

In addition, SCAA will continue to convene the work group and advocate for change. One important part of the process is tying various initiatives together. Three and a half years after the release of the Chartbook, a lot is happening in New York State around the issue of disconnected youth. Coordinated efforts should result in further progress and better outcomes for youth and young adults.