
Disconnected Youth:
An Answer to Preventing
Disengagement
Volume 2



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“Young people need to feel this sense of their own worth and importance, especially during the years between their childhood and maturity.”

–Eleanor Roosevelt

Executive Summary

In October 2007, the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy (SCAA) released a report that focused on preventing disconnection among young people involved in the child welfare and children’s mental health systems. The white paper recommended strategies to engage these youth and to provide supports for them before they transitioned out of those systems. This second paper will concentrate on two other systems—education and juvenile justice—and will recommend ways that the state can prevent disconnection with changes in those systems.

For our purposes, the term “disconnected youth” refers to individuals between the ages of 16 and 19 who are not in school and not employed. In 2006, there were 81,000 such young people in New York State.¹ A large number stand a significant chance of remaining disconnected. These young people are the future workforce. It is unconscionable that they have no prospects. In addition, without educated, highly-trained individuals, the state’s economy will suffer. We must invest in their potential.

That same year, 63,000 young people dropped out of high school in New York. There were 2,143 youth between the ages of 14 – 21 in juvenile justice facilities in the state, and 1,144 who were discharged from juvenile justice facilities. There were 10,168 young people between the ages of 16 – 24 in New York State prisons, and 4,950 youth released from state prisons. Over 900 youth were in care as a result of a Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) petition.²

This white paper poses and attempts to answer three questions:

- How can we keep youth in school and learning?
- How can we prevent youth from engaging in the negative behavior that puts them in contact with the corrections system?
- How must the culture or practices of the education and juvenile justice systems change in order to re-engage these youth?

The Process: Expert Discussions

In January 2008, SCAA reconvened the workgroup that helped produce the initial white paper on preventing disconnection. This meeting had the added benefit of participation from the State Education Department (SED).

Throughout 2008, SCAA met with the Commissioner of the Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) and her staff, with the Executive Director of the Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children, with the State Director of the Division of Probation and Correctional Alternatives, with the Director of Juvenile Justice Policy at the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, and with research staff at the New York State Community Justice Forum, Council on Children and Families (CCF). SCAA also met with the Executive Coordinator of SED's Office of K-16 Initiatives and Access Programs. These meetings had two purposes: information-sharing and engaging the agencies with the issue of disconnected youth.

At the same time, efforts were being taken in the Children's Cabinet to address disconnection. In June 2008, the Children's Cabinet Steering Committee created a joint Cabinet-Advisory Board work group on disconnected youth. That group met twice and proposed that the Cabinet focus on youth aged 14 to 24 in three target groups:

- Those in foster care and in kinship care (both those in foster care and those cared for by kin in the public assistance child-only caseload).
- Those on probation, or in juvenile or criminal justice facilities.
- Those with incarcerated parents.

In November 2008, the newly created Workgroup on Disconnected Youth met to determine:

- The needs of the aforementioned populations.
- The strategies that are effective in addressing those needs.
- The resources/actions necessary to continue to address those needs.

To date, a great deal of research and background information has been prepared to educate Workgroup members. For example, state agencies submitted overviews of at least two initiatives, programs, or services offered by their agency that would have the greatest potential benefits for these target youth. This information will be used to assist in meeting the Workgroup's initial goals, as outlined above.

Background

It became clear during the disconnected youth workgroup's initial discussions in 2007 that the one thing all young people have in common is their contact with the education system. However, it is also apparent that youths' relationships with that system vary greatly. Why do some excel and others falter?

Research shows that the adolescent brain is still developing its Executive Functions—things like impulse control, self-regulation, priority-setting, decision-making, and appreciating the consequences of behavior. Adolescents seek novelty and higher levels of stimulation than adults; they are also emotionally reactive.³ In addition, there are a number of outside factors that impact a child's ability to do well in school, including poor physical and mental health, learning disabilities, poverty, or problems within the family, such as abuse and neglect, parental mental health issues, or parental substance use issues. Many who are labeled as behavior problems are dealing with circumstances that affect their ability to concentrate, to get along with

others, and, ultimately, to get a high-quality education. Therefore, a typical teenager may have difficulty in school; those with other complications may find school particularly challenging.

In addition, boys and girls learn differently. In co-educational schools, classes must be structured to respect and cater to these differences. There should also be a greater focus on middle-level education, since many well-performing children lose their way in middle school or junior high. One discussion that needs to happen, but will not be addressed in this paper due to time and space, is the question of at what age children should move up from elementary school. If eleven-year-olds continue to be placed in schools with teens, then those schools should be re-structured to accommodate the needs of both younger and older youth.

This paper will also not address those young people who are a danger to themselves or others due to violent or criminal behavior. In those cases we make the assumption that a small number of youth require and will benefit from treatment beyond what can be accomplished in the community.

What can schools, parents, and communities do to ensure that all youth receive an equal chance at educational success? They can take a holistic approach early on and address a child's specific needs both in and out of the classroom. They can remove regulations that keep youth with behavioral problems out of school. Finally, they can better support teachers as they address issues beyond their curriculums, serving as de facto counselors and disciplinarians.

This paper takes the stance that if New York State were to assume this preventive approach, there would be fewer young people in our juvenile justice and correctional facilities. Many of the young people who end up there showed early signs of needing help that were either ignored or poorly responded to. Intervening in their lives earlier would make a huge difference in how those lives turn out.

An Overview of State System

Cross-system coordination is critically important in order to prevent disconnection. All child-serving systems must work together to ensure that young people do not fall through the cracks. One promising initiative in New York State is the Commissioners' Committee on Cross-Systems Services for Children and Youth. The Commissioners/Directors of New York State's ten health, education, and human services agencies, plus parent and youth partners, comprise the Committee. It focuses

“Disconnected services produce disconnected youth.”

—Clifford Bird, school principal, Step Up for Kids Rally,
September 16, 2008

“on achieving better outcomes for children, youth, and families by improving access to services and supports; ensuring quality coordinated services and supports from a qualified workforce; and collaborating to eliminate service barriers between systems.” Members have committed to sharing collective responsibility for ensuring that children, youth, and families achieve their desired outcomes. This cooperation, coupled with an action-oriented agenda, should result in positive and far-reaching changes for New York State's children, youth and families. CCF's involvement in maintaining the Committee's momentum should also help produce action on a number of child-serving issues.

► *Education Overview*

The education system is the one child-serving system that actually serves all children. In 2008-09, there were 3,123,000 students enrolled in kindergarten through grade 12 in public and nonpublic schools in New York State.⁴

Total school year expenditures for 2007-08 were more than \$51 billion. State funds were 45.1% of expenditures.⁵

Since children with emotional disturbances often, but not always, end up in special education classrooms, it is important to note that, in 2006, 559 children ages four to five and 35,850 children and youth ages six to seventeen received special education programs or services for emotional disturbances.⁶

In 2006, 63,000 students dropped out of New York State schools. In October 2008, Governor Paterson convened the first Governor's Summit on Student Engagement and Dropout Prevention. The Summit was sponsored by America's Promise and brought together government agency representatives, policy makers, researchers, and education experts from across New York State. The Summit followed the America's Promise tenets of "5 Promises to All Kids"—Caring Adults, Safe Places and Constructive Use of Time, A Healthy Start and Healthy Development, An Effective Education, and Opportunities to Make a Difference. Summit participants started a list of goals and strategies that would fall under each of those categories. They continue to meet by region, with a separate group of state organization stakeholders also meeting regularly.

► *Juvenile Justice Overview*

According to a 2007 report by *Fight Crime: Invest in Kids New York*, nearly 50,000 juveniles are arrested each year in the state. Approximately 2,500 are held in custody. Since the state spends \$125,000 to place juvenile offenders in the custody of the state Office of Children and Family Services for 10 months (and New York City spends more than \$200,000 for a year in custody), this is unfortunate in terms of cost and tragic in consequences to families.⁷

Juvenile arrests are defined by the Division of Criminal Justice Services as follows: "Agencies must count, as an arrest, any violation of law by a young person where some police or official action is taken beyond a mere interview, warning or admonishment. For the purpose of

crime reporting, a law enforcement agency must report a juvenile arrest when the circumstances are such that if the individual were an adult, an arrest would have been made. This also includes juveniles issued appearance tickets, or taken into custody or arrested where no formal charges are filed."

A Juvenile Offender (JO) is defined as a youth 13, 14 or 15 years of age who is charged and tried as an adult for committing one or more of crimes specified in Penal Law 30.00 (2), such as criminal possession of a weapon on school grounds, murder, or kidnapping. A Youthful Offender (YO) is a youth who was convicted of a crime when s/he was at least 16 years old and less than 19 years, eligible to have the conviction replaced with a non-criminal (youthful offender) adjudication because of the nature of the crime and the youth's prior record, and adjudicated a YO through the discretion of a supreme court judge who believes that adjudication was in the best interests of justice.⁸

A Juvenile Delinquent (JD) is a person adjudicated by the family court who was 7-15 years of age at the time s/he committed an act that would constitute a crime if committed by an adult. A Person In Need of Supervision (PINS) is a person less than 18 years of age who does not attend school in violation of education law, or who is incorrigible, ungovernable or habitually disobedient and beyond the lawful control of a parent or other lawful authority or who unlawfully possesses marijuana. As of July 1996, PINS may no longer be placed with OCFS.⁹ There are 17,000 JDs and PINS supervised by the state each year.¹⁰

The reporting of juvenile arrests is used to measure criminal activity, not juvenile court or probation activity. Juvenile arrest is the only available routine indicator of juvenile crime.

According to the New York State Division of Probation and Correctional Alternatives, there are approximately 40,000 – 50,000 new JD and PINS cases annually. Of those, about 17,000 end up in family court and placed on formal probation supervision. The rest are successfully adjusted and diverted out of the juve-

nile justice system. Of the 125,000 adult probationers in New York State, 40% are between the ages of 16 and 24. Alarming, this is the age group with the highest recidivism rate.¹¹

Three federal funding streams support DCJS initiatives—the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP), the Juvenile Accountability Block Grant (JABG) Program, and the Title V Delinquency Prevention Program. This funding has been steadily and dramatically decreasing. In fact, total funding from these federal sources decreased from over \$18 million in 2001 to just over \$5 million in 2008.

In September 2008, Governor Paterson created the Task Force on Transforming Juvenile Justice, charged with developing and designing a strategic blueprint for system transformation. The Task Force will examine alternatives to institutional placement and ways to assist in re-entry. It will also study ways to improve mental health and substance use treatment for youth in the system. In addition, the Task Force will address the disproportionate number of minorities in the system (three-quarters are African-American and Latino) and redefine the conditions for confinement.

Another issue being discussed in New York State is raising the age at which a youth can be tried in juvenile court. The state is currently one of only two that maintains an age 16 ceiling. This precise age limitation dates from 1824, when New York State enacted the first American criminal law that differentiated children from adults. However, by 1940 virtually every state had raised the age limit. Today, we know more about adolescent brain development, which tells us that youth do not have the same ability as adults when it comes to reasoning, decision-making, and weighing consequences. We are also aware that criminal prosecution and time-served in adult facilities can have negative long-term results. In addition, public safety would benefit from a lower recidivism rate and less serious recidivist crimes. Therefore, a group of interested parties in New York State is discussing the issue and how best to approach it with policy makers and the public.

Looking at the Issue along the Continuum

In order to benefit from a true model of prevention, we must address the issues of our younger learners as we simultaneously address the issues of those young people who have already fallen behind, become lost in the educational system, or ended up in the juvenile justice system.

“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”

—Frederick Douglass

► *The Earliest Years*

Even infants and toddlers can have mental health issues. Sometimes these issues manifest themselves without warning and for no apparent reason. At other times, adverse events such as abuse and neglect, poverty, and parental mental health and substance use negatively impact the psyche of an infant or toddler.

The adults, including parents and other caregivers, in an infant or toddler’s life provide the comfort, security, consistency and predictability necessary to balance the child’s feelings.¹² In the long-run, an inability to provide these supports may negatively affect a child’s concentration, patience, and capacity to get along with others.

In New York State, approximately 12,000 children—fewer than 7% of children born annually—are served through a patchwork of funding by evidence-based prenatal-early childhood home visiting programs, including Healthy Families New York, Nurse-Family Partnership, Parent-Child Home, and Parents as Teachers, that have been shown to have positive effects on the well-being of children and families. These earliest years are imperative to healthy development and prevention efforts should be instituted during this time.

► *The Preschool Years*

106,000 children, or 45%, of eligible four-year-olds are currently enrolled in Pre-K programs in New York State. Approximately 50,000 three- and four-year-olds, or 42% of eligible children, are served by Head Start.

Disturbingly, this country has recently seen a trend of very young children being expelled from early care and learning programs for behavior problems. The New York State Children's Mental Health Plan's Social Emotional Workgroup *Draft Report of Workgroup Proceedings*, issued in April 2008, stated that "Head Start teachers have reported that their children exhibit signs of serious emotional distress, including depression, withdrawal, and problems with aggression and antisocial behavior."¹³ In a study of nearly 4,000 state-funded prekindergarten classes randomly selected across the nation, 10.4% of teachers report at least one expulsion in their classes during the past 12 months.¹⁴

Such problems during the preschool years are meaningful predictors of continued behavior problems, poor peer standing, and academic difficulties during kindergarten.¹⁵ Kindergarten teachers indicate greatest concern for children in their classes who lack the motivational incentives for new learning and the socio-emotional capacities for getting along with others.¹⁶

Children cannot be dismissed as "bad seeds." A child's conduct has a great deal to do with their emotional well-being and with their physical health. Do they live in a safe environment? Are they healthy? Are they hungry? Do they receive enough positive attention? Are they disciplined properly? These are important questions to ask and answer, since the children who falter in preschool are more likely to become the youth who are kicked out or who drop out of high school.

In addition, some behavior by young children is simply developmentally normal. Unfortunately, some early care and learning professionals lack the training necessary to understand and appreciate such behavior. Preschool teachers also may not be qualified to make determina-

tions regarding mental health status. Workforce supports should be implemented that will help raise qualifications so that children receive proper discipline and referrals to services, and early care and learning professionals are more fully prepared and not unduly stressed.

► *The School Years*

Students with disabilities, both physical and emotional, often find themselves in special education classes. It is disheartening to know that by 8th grade, only 12% of students with emotional disabilities and 16% of students with physical disabilities are proficient in reading, compared to 64% of their non-disabled peers.¹⁷ These students are behind the curve and in grave danger of becoming disconnected.

In addition, any child's life circumstances can change in an instant—they may be impacted by a move, parental divorce, illness or job loss within the family. Furthermore, as discussed previously, adolescents are ill-equipped to make mature decisions. The school years are a time of change that can be tumultuous for even the most well-adjusted. So it is imperative that schools work with parents and the community to offer supports to all students, particularly those at-risk.

► *In the Juvenile Justice System*

The juvenile justice system should not be geared simply to house young offenders. It should have a role in helping them get their lives back on track.

The Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) tracks the inmate attainment rate for high school diplomas and GEDs. Of those youth aged 16 to 24 released from state prisons in 2007, 54% had a high school diploma, a GED, or some college experience. Two-thirds were determined to have a vocational need—17% completed training prior to their release, while 29% were participating in training at the time of release.

Youth in criminal justice facilities are also screened at intake for substance use disorders. In 2004, DOCS reported that 85% of inmates

released that year had an identified need for treatment; 67.9% of them completed a treatment program.

To identify additional problem areas, New York State has been using the Youth Assessment Screening Inventory (YASI) since 2000. This evidence-based tool prioritizes risk and need, diverting low-risk cases, and establishes case plans for those who are medium- to high-risk. Since almost all counties in the state use the tool, there is a great deal of standardization and uniformity in risk assessment. Of the three counties not currently using YASI, Tompkins will begin in January 2009, St. Lawrence will begin later in 2009, and New York City uses the PAT (Probation Assessment Tool). Perhaps most interesting is that YASI results showed an estimated 45% of JDs and PINS with a moderate or high-risk score in the mental health domain were in the area of risk of future recidivism.

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Prevention and Intervention Recommendations

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Prevention initiatives would save New York State money in the long-run. Prevention and early intervention can also make an enormous immediate difference in the lives of children and families.

For example, foster care costs more than \$16,000 per child, per year. Maintaining a prisoner in New York State costs \$32,400 a year. In all, the state spends more than \$2.5 billion a year dealing with the consequences of child abuse and only \$23 million on home visiting programs that are proven to prevent child abuse and neglect. Home visiting programs cost only \$3,500 to \$6,500 per family, per year.¹⁸

According to Fight Crime: Invest in Kids New York, “Ten percentage-point increases in graduation rates have historically been shown to reduce murder and assault rates by approximately 20 percent. Increasing graduation rates

by 10 percentage points would prevent 180 murders and 9,100 aggravated assaults in New York each year.”¹⁹

The following initiatives would help prevent disconnection from school, as well as behaviors that result in disciplinary action or out-of-home placements. New York State should:

- **Increase family supports for the parents and caregivers of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.** We must lay a solid foundation for youth to build an education. Parents are a child’s first and most important teachers.
 - ▶ For young children, programs such as home visiting and parent education can strengthen families and help ensure that children are nurtured, cared for, and taught properly. Providing families with paid leave after a birth or adoption can aid in the bonding process. These important supports should be available to all families, with more intensive supports targeted to those families who are at high-risk because of factors such as poverty, homelessness, or early pregnancy.
 - ▶ Early childhood programs are another venue in which to target preventive measures and interventions. However, early care and education professionals are not always experts in early childhood or in children’s mental health. New York State must support the people who nurture and teach our youngest children by providing them opportunities to increase their education and training in both early childhood development and infant/toddler mental health.
 - ▶ In addition, employing early childhood mental health consultants in early care and learning settings can more effectively identify mental health issues and make appropriate referrals, as well as take that burden off early care and education professionals. This team approach would help alleviate behaviors that could

become problematic over time, instead dealing with them before they become more than concerns or challenges for the child and family. One summary of randomized studies of early childhood mental health consultant programs found positive outcomes for staff, early childhood programs, and children and families, including decreased job stress for teachers, decreased staff turnover for programs, improved social skills for children, and increased parenting skills for families. Families also gained important access to mental health services, and fewer children were expelled from programs for behavioral problems.²⁰

- **Re-conceptualize transitions across the life span.** Our society recognizes natural transitions, such as those from an early care and learning program to school, from grade school to middle, from middle to high school, and from high school to college or work. We will be more responsive and, indeed, anticipatory to the needs of our young people if we understand “transitions” as including life changes like parental divorce and moving. School districts should assign a case worker at the initial school placement so that at least one responsible adult can follow that child’s academic career, with an understanding of the child’s life outside the school walls.
- **Increase the utilization by schools and other normative settings of Child and Family Clinic Plus.** We cannot treat our young people for and help them to recover from mental health issues if we do not know they are suffering. A promising prevention and intervention strategy is Child and Family Clinic Plus, which currently provides statewide assessments in normative settings including child care, Pre-K programs, and schools. As of late September 2008, nearly 20,000 children had received a screening. Screenings were provided in a variety of settings:
 - ▶ Over 5,000 in elementary schools.
 - ▶ Over 4,000 in middle schools.

- ▶ Over 3,000 in high schools.
- ▶ Over 1,000 in Head Start programs.
- ▶ Nearly 500 in early childhood programs.
- ▶ Over 600 in foster care.
- ▶ Over 5,000 in other settings, such as pediatric offices and afterschool programs.

Although these results are promising, many more children are in need of intervention. Early childhood programs and elementary, middle, and secondary schools must take greater advantage of the services provided by Clinic Plus. The state must better educate parents and communities as to the importance of receiving help for their children early on. In turn, informed citizens may demand identification, assessment, referral and treatment services.

- **Connect Child and Family Clinic Plus with Probation.** The Division of Probation and Correctional Alternatives and the Office of Mental Health (OMH) have partnered to link Clinic Plus and Probation. This link will help ensure that the most high-risk youth receive the assessments and clinical consultations necessary to intervene effectively. Pilots are planned in Monroe, Onondaga and Schenectady Counties. The pilots will first involve a Clinic Plus screening of JD and PINS cases at probation. The screening results will inform the YASI Full Assessment. Those cases that then score moderate or high-risk on YASI in the mental health domain will be referred for in-depth evaluations and possible treatment through the county Clinic Plus provider.
- **Implement *The Children’s Plan: Improving the Social and Emotional Well-Being of New York’s Children and Their Families*.** The Plan, developed over the course of a year with input from experts and state agency representatives, was submitted to the Governor in October 2008 by the commissioners of nine child-serving agencies. It lays out a course of action to improve supports and services to New York State’s children and builds on the following premises:

- ▶ Social and emotional development is everyone’s concern, not a single state agency’s mission.
- ▶ Social and emotional development is an essential component in the development of each child.
- ▶ Responsibility for emotional well-being lies with families, friends, care givers, schools and communities.
- ▶ We must take a public health approach to promoting social and emotional development and learning.
- ▶ Preparing young people developmentally is more than avoiding risk, it is promoting positive growth.

The state should implement the recommendations made by the Plan, thereby promoting the well-being of children and families and decreasing the long-term costs associated with delayed treatment, unemployment, incarceration, and homelessness.

- **Ensure that responsibility for education is collaborative between state agencies.** OMH and the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) currently have responsibility for the education of youth in residential mental health placements, the juvenile justice system under the auspices of OCFS, and foster care licensed agencies, respectively. There is no standardization in terms of curriculum. Young people often leave these placements ill-prepared to return to school because they are behind in their studies, or because the credits they’ve earned while in placement are non-transferable to the public school system. The last thing that these young people need is to be even farther behind than their peers.

The state should shift responsibility for the education of these young people to a collaborative effort between those agencies and SED, so that those youth receive a high-quality education and are able to re-enter an appropriate school program with minimal interruptions. There should never be more than a two-week interruption in schooling.

Every attempt to facilitate a smooth transition back to the community and the school of origin should be made. This includes planning with the student and school long before the transition takes place, and the assignment of a mentor or another caring adult to help with the transition process.

- **Invest in mentoring programs.** During the discussions with state agency staff and other experts, a recurring theme emerged—the importance of at least one caring and concerned adult in a young person’s life. Whether it is a parent, teacher, peer, or friend, a consistent and stable presence that a young person can depend on is essential to their success in life. Unfortunately, the current capacity of mentoring programs across the state is limited and many youth find themselves on waiting lists. In the previous white paper, the recommendation regarding this issue was to “ensure significant support systems.” This paper goes one step further and recommends that the state invest in a program targeted specifically to high-risk youth. In order to fund this program, the state would need to merge existing resources across agencies.

More than 20 years ago, then-First Lady of New York State Matilda Cuomo established the nation’s first state-wide school-based one-to-one mentoring program. In 1995, she established Mentoring USA to continue the goals of the New York State program. Mentoring USA has now expanded to Mentoring USA Italia, providing mentors for over 600 hundred children. Instead of reinventing the wheel, the state would do well to re-visit the program and update where appropriate.

School districts can also utilize cost-neutral mentoring methods, such as “silent mentoring.” Under this model, administrators would identify youth who appear to be “flying under the radar”—young people who no teachers have any personal involvement with. Teachers would then volunteer to become silent mentors and would apply tactics as simple but as important as saying hello to an assigned student every day. The point

of silent mentoring is that the student feels acknowledged and recognized without even realizing that s/he has a mentor.

- **Continue investments in and increase promotion of service learning.** The *Learn and Serve America Program* involves over 35,000 students in New York State schools. Through this program, which integrates curriculum with practical application through service, young people contribute more than 600,000 hours annually to their communities and have been doing so for the past 15 years.

Youth engaged in service learning programs not only help others; they develop self-confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of responsibility and connectedness in the process. Service learning can help steer them away from negative behaviors and into more positive outlets for their energy and interests. It can also help connect and re-connect them to school and community. In light of the current economic situation, it is more important than ever to connect young people to school and to the real world. By helping others, they are also benefiting themselves and their futures.

- **Decrease truancy and deal with truants differently.** Truancy is a risk factor for juvenile delinquency. Many truancy situations become PINS petitions and, if unsuccessfully diverted, Child Protective Services (CPS) reports. Truancy situations often become PINS petitions late in the school year, leading to more extreme actions than school discipline.

Usually truancy in and of itself does not warrant the response it receives in some districts. Treating truants like criminals only serves to reinforce negative behaviors. Given that school is popularly considered the workplace of the child, there are ways to make that workplace an attractive and productive environment that youth will want to attend.

Schools must recognize that not all young people fit into one educational box. Depending on funding, capacity, and space, they could offer alternative programs or make special accommodations for at-risk youth who learn

differently than their peers. At the same time, it is the parents' responsibility to see that their children attend school. They must instill a sense of respect for education in their children, so that they understand the importance of formal learning.

SED has ideas for teachers, administrators, and parent teacher student associations regarding attendance policy development on its website.²¹ SED says, in part, that "Maintenance of high attendance rates depends upon incentives and sanctions." The site offers possible sources for incentives, including projects to promote attendance and partnerships with businesses, churches, and community-based organizations. It also lists sanctions, such as detention and the denial of participation in extra-curricular activities, but stresses that disincentives are a bad idea when school policies do not include incentives.

If young people are in school, they're not on the streets. In order to learn, students must be present. Therefore, we must keep them in school by setting specific rules and policies regarding truancy and educational neglect that are uniform across the state and by involving parents in both engagement and disciplinary action. The consistency and uniformity of Probation's YASI has resulted in standardization of assessments from county to county. Truancy could learn a lesson or two from that success. Currently, the definition of truancy varies by school district.

According to one report, 59 – 65% of high school dropouts surveyed said that they had "missed class often before dropping out."²² Schools often wait too long before reporting educational neglect or filing a PINS petition. (*See recommendation below.*) Intervening on the eighteenth day of absence is too late; schools and parents must work together to see that both the truant behavior and the reasons behind that behavior are addressed when it first occurs. Attendance officers that hunt truant students down and return them to the very class they skipped are probably not all that effective when dealing with repeat or chronic offenders. By the same token, CPS and Family

Court should be last resorts used in serious cases. Schools should make every effort to remediate problem students' behavior in alternative settings. (*See out-of-school suspension below.*)

- **Eliminate education neglect reports.** Education neglect and PINS reports are the education systems' response to truancy. Twenty-one states accept "failure to educate" in their definition of neglect, including New York. In 2004, over 27,000 reports of child maltreatment were made in New York State by mandated reporters in education, many of which alleged educational neglect.

Often, educational neglect reports come late in the school year and name students who have been absent an excessive number of days. By this time, youth named in these reports are failing and may even be well on their way to dropping out. Child Protective Services lacks the resources to help at this late stage. The State Central Register should not accept these reports unless schools have provided services and parents simply refuse to send their child to school. (It should be noted that some parents try to get their children to school, but that the child's mental health issues prevent them from attempting. Alternatives and supports must be offered to struggling families.) SED should provide local school districts with model protocols and uniform definitions of educational neglect.

- **Discontinue the use of out-of-school suspension as punishment for youth with behavior problems.** Young people belong in school. Barring them from school, unless they are a danger to themselves or others, is unnecessary and counter-productive. Difficult decisions must be made when a student's behavior is disruptive to other students' education. However, out-of-school suspensions allow many young people to stay at home, often unsupervised, with plenty of free time—not exactly a punishment. This practice also results in students getting behind in their schoolwork. Students who warrant a suspension should continue to attend school,

although they could be taught in separate classrooms from the general population and should receive detention prior to or immediately following the regular school day.

Before disciplinary action is warranted, young people whose behavior in traditional classroom settings is disruptive to other students can be taught in alternative instruction sites. An increased focus on classroom management and mentoring can also help alleviate problems before they get out of hand.

- **Decrease the dropout rate.** Young people do not just suddenly decide to drop out one day. The decision to leave school is a cumulative one that occurs over time and that has many points at which intervention is possible. According to the report referenced above, 45% of high school dropouts surveyed stated that they "started high school poorly prepared by their earlier schooling."²³ Only 59% said that their parents or guardians were involved in their education. Another 47% left school because "classes were not interesting."

If we expect young people to remain in school, the adults in their lives—both at home and in the classroom—must be more involved and engaged in both what and how they are learning, including understanding how they process information. Some youth may require a customized program that is flexible and responsive to their individual needs. A connection between young people and their teachers or families must start early and be consistent in order to have a real impact.

In addition, we must recognize that there are a number of factors that contribute to dropping out. If the state invested more in early care and learning, family engagement, health and mental health care, young people would have a more positive educational experience from Pre-K on and would be at less risk of dropping out in junior or senior high school. The state must understand and admit that teachers cannot turn every

troubled child around at the eleventh hour, and should invest in long-term supports that will strengthen the child's experience over the years so that a last-minute, unlikely-to-succeed, intervention is unnecessary. On the other hand, schools must be willing to respond in an urgent and personal manner to the needs of a student at-risk of leaving school due to the onset of a personal issue or family crisis.

New York State should examine recreating the Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection, currently in Rochester and Syracuse, in other sites. Hillside doubles the graduation rates for its enrollees. Between 75% and 80% of graduates pursue post-secondary education, and 80% report being employed post-graduation. The program, which includes stakeholders from private sector employers, local school districts, the health care industry, and institutions of higher education, incorporates five key components: mentoring and family support; academic support, including tutoring; preventive health care education and direct access to health care; job placement; and post-secondary planning and support. One evaluation of the program concluded that the return on investment in 2006 was \$45.3 million for the community, based on increased earnings and decreased governmental expenditures.²⁴

- **Decrease the use of GEDs.** Passage of the General Educational Development (GED®) test results in the award of the New York State High School Equivalency Diploma. Credentials were awarded to 31,668 people in New York State in 2007. That number reflects a statewide pass rate of only 59%. This rate does not separate those who received instruction from those who did not. According to SED, the success rate is significantly higher in approved instructional programs. The pass rate is influenced by the fact that the state has no minimum instructional requirement and does not attach a fee to testing, which often places a greater value on good results for exam takers.

Not every child will achieve a Regents diploma. Some drop out of school because of poor academic performance; others for personal and family reasons. In addition, it can be argued that traditional school settings are not conducive to fostering the individual learning style of every young person. Some youth are not well-suited to cookie-cutter academic programs and are better off pursuing a GED that will allow them to move forward and attend a trade school or community college, or enter the workforce. These youth can return to school to pursue a Regents diploma should they decide to in the future. Youth need to be made aware of their options when deciding to drop out. An “exit strategy” discussion with the principal and guidance counselor could be extremely helpful in devising a game plan for the future.

- **Support and train teachers and school personnel.** Teachers are in schools to teach—not to discipline or counsel. However, enabling youth to learn may require both discipline and responding to social emotional issues. This is a tough task for even the most compassionate and committed educators. They must be supported in this endeavor.
 - ▶ Education of prospective teachers, as well as training and professional development of current teachers and other school gatekeepers, such as school secretaries, counselors and coaches, must include training in adolescent brain development and mental health, information on effective interventions, and referral information. College preparation courses must also spend significantly more time on classroom management, including classroom structure, response to behaviors, and options for de-escalating behavior.
 - ▶ Professional development should be teacher-centered. As students are individuals who learn differently, so are teachers.

- ▶ There should be greater supervision of new teachers, including sharing of lesson plans and increased feedback from peers and administrators. A mentoring program for teachers is as important as one for students.
- ▶ There must be an attitudinal/cultural shift toward greater support of teachers by administrators.
- ▶ There must be a clear sense, articulated from the top down, regarding the goal of keeping young people in school and enabling them to graduate.
- ▶ There should be school- and district-wide support for positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS), an approach that establishes a climate in which appropriate behavior is the norm. PBIS supports social competence and academic achievement, staff and student behavior, and decision-making.²⁵ OMH and SED are collaborating to jointly support PBIS. They have created regional school-focused family coordinator positions to increase family involvement and support through school-wide PBIS implementation.²⁶

How must the culture or practices of the education and juvenile justice systems change in order to re-engage these youth? The culture and practices of these two systems must first support re-engagement and then help it to happen. The education system must leave the door open to students who want to return and graduate. The juvenile justice system must provide avenues for youth to successfully transition back to school or into the workforce.

The bottom line is that New York State needs to invest more resources in prevention, which would result in less remediation and a decrease in accompanying fiscal and social costs. Prevention would have both immediate and long-range benefits for children, youth, families, and the educators, counselors, law enforcement officials and others who serve them. We cannot continue to allow young people to fall between the cracks. Their futures depend on decision-makers resolving that disconnection is not an option—and then figuring out how to connect and re-connect them to society.

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Conclusion

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This paper posed several questions and has attempted to answer them with the proposed recommendations. However, the general answers to the questions are relatively simple.

How can we keep youth in school and learning? We can better meet the needs of both students and teachers.

How can we prevent youth from engaging in the negative behavior that puts them in contact with the corrections system? We can connect them, early in life, to caring adults and other supports that will help them as they grow and transition.

Endnotes

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