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There is growing awareness that millions of young people in this nation face considerable education and employment challenges. Youth are dropping out of high school in alarming numbers – One third of the youth who start ninth grade will not complete high school four years later and 50 percent of minority youth and youth in high poverty urban and rural communities are leaving school before graduating. **In 2007 alone, an astounding 16.0 percent of 16 to 24 year olds (nearly 6.2 million people) were high school dropouts.**ⁱ Furthermore, many who do graduate lack the skills necessary to compete successfully in the labor market. There has been a dramatic increase in youth gang activities affecting urban, suburban, and rural communities and the employment rate for youth is at its lowest in 60 years.

Congress will soon reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act. This is an opportunity to focus on needs of youth who are undereducated and unskilled in a labor market that requires increased education, credentials and skills to access good jobs with decent wages. WIA reauthorization can set a vision for how the nation intends to respond to the challenges and define the role that WIA can play in tandem with other federal funding streams – such as ESEA, Perkins, IDEA, national service – that can help prepare youth to compete in today's economy.

To develop greater coherence and alignment across funding streams, certain principles should be incorporated in WIA reauthorization as well as in subsequent reauthorizations of related legislation. In this way, Congress can signal its intent to work across systems and restructure federal approaches to meet this youth challenge and address the demands of a 21st Century economy. For example, WIA reauthorization should incorporate requirements for more strategic programming, more cross system collaboration, greater focus on disconnected or disconnecting youth, more support services, multiple avenues for post-secondary access and greater labor market connectedness.

Even before the current economic recession, the nation needed a fresh approach to how we educate and train our young people. Over the past four decades, the American economy has undergone a fundamental shift from a largely industrial economy to a service economy driven by information, knowledge, and innovation. Private industry, government, and economists all acknowledge that the need for an “education system that prepares students, workers and citizens to triumph in the

global skills race is the central economic competitiveness issue for the next decade”.ⁱⁱ

As we rebound from this recession, economists predict that recouping jobs that were lost will take time and they emphasize the need for postsecondary skills to prepare for emerging jobs in the new economy. This will continue to be a difficult time for youth who have academic and skill deficits. As we reconstruct our youth workforce system under WIA, we must consider this time of economic recovery and re-engineering to concurrently invest in producing a skilled generation of young workers – with a specific focus on those who are being left behind. We need the full potential and talent of these youth to fuel the economy of the future.

BUILD ON BEST PRACTICE: SMART INVESTMENTS IN WHAT WORKS

A body of knowledge developed over the past decade points to key elements of successful practice working with youth in high risk situations. These include the capacity to share data across systems to better serve youth; integrated approaches to the delivery of basic skills, career preparation, work exposure and work experience; youth development, leadership, mentoring opportunities; and strong case management providing timely connection to mental and physical health services, transportation, financial support and housing assistance.ⁱⁱⁱ We also know that services are more effective and resources are better used when all systems and sectors work together. Effective coordinating efforts are underway at the state and local levels. Twenty-four states have established cross-agency coordinating bodies for children and youth, and across the country cities are creating “youth master plans” to facilitate the development of sustained and coordinated strategies that yield large and lasting dividends and ensure that opportunities to improve outcomes for children and youth are not squandered.”^{iv} However, coordination alone cannot resolve glaring gaps in service and opportunity in high poverty communities. From the National Youth Opportunity Grant program authorized under WIA, we learned that with sufficient infusion of strategically directed financial and human capital, positive impacts can occur in a relatively short period of time and change the opportunity landscape for youth in these communities.^{v1}

¹ The Youth Opportunity Initiative funded 36 high poverty rural and urban communities from 2000-2005 to improve education and labor market outcomes for youth age 14-21. An independent evaluation, released by the Department of Labor in 2008, found positive results- noting that grantees were able to increase educational attainment, Pell Grant receipt, labor market participation, and employment rates and earnings for more than 90,000 youth.

Critical to the success of any youth intervention are investments that build the organizational and professional capacity of youth service professionals and youth-serving organizations. Youth service professionals, including intake workers, case managers, job developers, and independent living specialists, are often the first contact or “face” of youth-serving systems and must gain specific knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to work with this emerging workforce. There is currently no national system of professional development that identifies, builds, and certifies the KSAs of practitioners. Yet professional development has been linked to: professionalization of a field, increased job satisfaction, better youth programs, and improved youth outcomes.^{vi}

Research shows that these young people are not dead-end drop outs. Many experience great remorse for dropping out of school and express a strong interest in reengaging with students their own age. In fact, in a recent national survey of high school dropouts, 76 percent said that they would likely re-enroll in school if given a chance.^{vii} Communities across the country have been implementing promising practices and research-based strategies to reengage these young people, however, many lack the supports needed to serve this vulnerable and at times invisible population at scale. Congress must build on this knowledge to deliver sufficient number and effective opportunities to America’s young people that prepare them for productive adulthood. With a dramatic increase in overall funding for youth workforce development and education, WIA can serve as the cornerstone of a robust youth service infrastructure.

We believe the youth service program design/delivery must be based on the following core principles:

- Work in concert with education, including adult education, and other youth serving systems –i.e. child welfare, justice – to prioritize vulnerable youth for service and coordinate transition support for them;
- Reach out to youth who have disengaged from education and labor market pursuits and help them reconnect to education, training, and employment supports;
- Work in tandem with the secondary system – in particular with school reform efforts -to keep youth who are in high-risk situations attached to school; and
- Convene workforce, public education, labor, employers, higher education and community-based organizations to craft pathways to postsecondary and labor market success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase the focus on comprehensive programming within Youth Activities formula and other targeted youth streams for dropouts and youth in high risk categories – including homeless youth, youth in foster care, young offenders, youth with disabilities, and pregnant and parenting teens by requiring:

- At least 50 percent of WIA Youth Activities formula funds allocated to local areas be used to serve youth, ages 14-24, in these high risk categories and those who have dropped out of high school.
- Impediments related to income eligibility and verification that make it difficult for local areas to enroll these youth be addressed. Changes that would allow states and local areas to better serve youth in these high-risk situations, plus high school drop outs, consist of automatic eligibility for these youth groups, expanding eligibility to age 24, and increasing the baseline for income eligibility.
- Local area coordinating bodies develop youth plans in which they conduct data analysis and strategically assess programs to address the needs of youth in these specific high-risk categories and how funding will be appropriated to support these needs.

Strengthen provisions that will support Youth Councils (or other appropriately designated entities) to play the strategic role in implementing comprehensive approaches to youth service delivery at the local level via:

- Establishing a youth council function in all federal funding streams, including discretionary grants, that target funding to local areas that serve youth in high risk categories. The youth council function would support the intentional integration of federal programming across agencies and systems and facilitate the development of sustained and coordinated strategies at the state and local level.
- Provisions that call for constructive engagement of youth involvement on these councils as well as on youth advisory boards to give young people a voice in co-developing interventions and advising high-level government officials.
- Requiring state and local workforce investment boards to work in partnership with these Councils to coordinate youth resources and services across the entire WIA system, including, adult education, One-Stops, and accurate labor market information use. These entities would be charged with making necessary improvements to deliver youth-appropriate and accessible programming.
- Incentive awards and other recognition to areas where workforce boards and youth councils are successfully performing this function.

Create an Innovations and Capacity Building Fund to build the delivery capacity in high-poverty communities to implement innovative community-based and nationally recognized strategies through a separate funding stream that provides grants to:

- Mayor or chief municipal officer-led partnerships to integrate new and existing services into an intentional community-wide engagement and dropout recovery system for high-risk youth, such as job training, education, comprehensive support services, leadership development, work experience.
- Collaborations among secondary, postsecondary, workforce, and business to develop a menu of diverse secondary education options that reconnect youth to multiple education and career pathways that will prepare them for postsecondary access, persistence, completion and degree/credential attainment and success in the labor market.
- Youth Councils (or other appropriately designated entity) to provide support, training and technical assistance to build the capacity of youth service professionals and youth-serving organizations.

Expand funding for work experience, internships, and service and conservation corps to ensure young people, especially those in communities of high economic distress, have “hands-on” exposure to work and the workplace:

- Essential to any youth service delivery system should be ample opportunities for young people to access internships, pre-apprenticeships, subsidized and transitional jobs, including both summer and year-round work experiences. In addition to increased funding to meet demand from its communities and youth, local workforce areas should also provide documentation on how they will ensure that such activities are adequately made available to in-school and out-of-school youth.

Establish a fund to build the capacity of youth service professionals and organizations at the national and state level to maximize youth outcomes via the:

- Provision of technical assistance services, including support for evaluation, data systems and related enhancements, knowledge development, and dissemination. This fund should be administered by the Department of Labor and through contracts with national and local non-profit organizations and awarded through competitive processes.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ *Left behind in America: The Nation's Dropout Crisis*, The Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University and the Alternative Schools Network in Chicago, May 2009,

http://www.clms.neu.edu/publication/documents/CLMS_2009_Dropout_Report.pdf

ⁱⁱ *21st Century Skills, Education & Competitiveness: A Resource and Policy Guide*, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008, http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/documents/21st_century_skills_education_and_competitiveness_guide.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ *Guideposts for Success*, 2nd Edition, Institute for Educational Leadership, The National Collaborative on Workforce & Disability for Youth, http://www.ncwd-youth.info/sites/default/files/page/2009/02/guideposts_0.pdf

^{iv} Action Kit for Municipal Leaders, Issue# 10, "Youth Master Plan", National League of Cities, Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, http://www.nlc.org/assets/fe8fc40157954b35aa6bc9c0c450d330/iyef_action_kit_youth_master_planning.pdf

^v Decision Information Resources, Inc., "Evaluation of Youth Opportunity Grant," 2008, http://wdr.doleta.gov/research/FullText_Documents/YO%20Impact%20and%20Synthesis%20Report.pdf

^{vi} *Info Brief*, Issue 19 "The Workforce Development System & the Professional Development of Youth Service Professionals: Why Professional Development?", The National Collaborative on Workforce & Disability for Youth, February 2006, http://www.ncwdyouth.info/sites/default/files/infobrief_issue19.pdf

^{vii} John M. Bridgeland, John L DiIulio, Jr., & Karen Burke Morison, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2006, <http://www.civicerprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf>

ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN FOR YOUTH

Housed at the Center for Law and Social Policy, the Campaign for Youth is an alliance of organizations who are concerned about the persistence, yet seeming invisibility, of the challenges confronting more than 5 million young people in this nation who are disconnected from education, employment and opportunity. Established in 2002 by the leadership of national youth serving organizations, the Campaign for Youth's mission is to build a united voice for disadvantaged and disconnected youth in this nation, and to build a constituency for action. For more information on the Campaign for Youth and the partnering organizations, please visit www.campaignforyouth.org or email kbird@clasp.org.