



# NEW DIRECTIONS

Creating Career Pathways  
for and with Opportunity Youth

BOSTON OPPORTUNITY  
YOUTH COLLABORATIVE  
2013-2018 AND BEYOND





## Partners & Affiliates

This report builds on the research, pathway design, and implementation activities conceived of and overseen by the Opportunity Youth Collaborative, whose members include the following organizations.

Action for Boston Community Development	Health Resources in Action
American Student Assistance	The Home for Little Wanderers
Asian American Civic Association	The Hyams Foundation
Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology	Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción
Boston Asian Youth Essential Services	Jewish Vocational Service
Boston Cares	KeySteps
Boston Centers for Youth and Families	Liberty Mutual Foundation
Boston Day and Evening Academy	Mass Advocates for Children
Boston Opportunity Agenda	Massachusetts Department of Youth Services
Boston Private Industry Council	MassHire Boston Career Center
Boston Public Schools	Mayor's Education Cabinet
Boston ROCA	Mayor's Office of Workforce Development
Boston Student Advisory Council	My Brother's Keeper
Boston Youth Service Network	More than Words
Bridge Over Troubled Water	Rennie Center for Education and Research Policy
Bunker Hill Community College	Roxbury Community College
Center for Promise/America's Promise Alliance	SkillWorks
Citizens for Juvenile Justice	Sociedad Latina
College Bound Dorchester	State Street Corporation
Commonwealth Corporation	Teen Empowerment
Community Works Services	United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley
Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative	William J. Ostiguy High School
East Boston Neighborhood Health Center	X-Cel Education
EDCO Youth Alternative High School Program	Year Up
Freedom House	Youth Voice Project
Future Chefs	YouthBuild Boston
GED Plus/ESAC	

## Funders

This work was pursued with financial support from the following organizations.

NATIONAL	LOCAL
Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions	Angell Foundation
Social Innovation Fund, Corporation for National and Community Service	Barr Foundation
Jobs for the Future	The Boston Foundation
The Annie E. Casey Foundation	The Hyams Foundation
	The Lloyd G. Balfour Foundation
	Liberty Mutual Foundation

Northeastern University and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority provided in-kind support to the Connection Center.

# FOREWORD

In 2013, the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions started the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund to mobilize support for Opportunity Youth—16-24-year-olds who are disconnected from school and work. Due in large part to the groundwork laid by our existing collective impact initiatives, Boston won a place among these communities.

It is no surprise that local stakeholders were eager for this opportunity. Diverse, cross-sector initiatives had worked with the Boston Public Schools since 2004 to reduce the number of students dropping out of high school, and with postsecondary institutions since 2008 to increase the six-year college completion rate for high school graduates. Experience provided a sense of agency. We knew that approaches that include research, community voice, strategic planning and new interventions could have an impact on seemingly intractable problems—particularly when affiliated with a national campaign.

As we began this work, the stakes for young adults and for the community were clear. Young people who leave high school early face a high likelihood of poverty and other negative outcomes. Many of those who do not complete college or job training will struggle to make it into the middle class. While there were significant challenges to confronting these realities, the social and financial costs of inaction were and remain totally unacceptable.

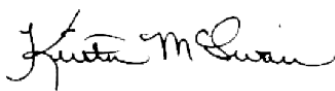
Due to our progress in lowering the dropout rate, it only made sense for Boston's Opportunity Youth Collaborative to focus its implementation efforts on Opportunity Youth with a high school credential—surprisingly, the largest segment of this population living in Boston at the time. We launched the Connection Center—a one-stop center that provided outreach, assessment and referral for these young adults. Through this project, we learned about the programs and institutions available to young people, and some of the barriers to program persistence and completion.

We engaged institutional leaders along the way—community college leaders, workforce agency directors, and policymakers—sharing what we learned through implementation and research. We also focused advocacy efforts on dropout prevention, partnering with the BPS on initiatives like the “Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline” campaign.

This report summarizes the experiences of the Collaborative and its activities over the last six years. It highlights what we learned and makes recommendations for institutional and systemic changes. It concludes with an invitation for others working in this space to join us in the next phase of our convening.

Though the most substantial national grants have ended, much remains to be done. Our work, an improving economy, and the new focus on this population have resulted in a decrease in the number of Opportunity Youth. However, the needs of those who remain disconnected are even more complex. Their disengagement is our most glaring systemic failure; their potential for success, conversely, our greatest opportunity.

Sincerely,



Kristin McSwain  
Executive Director  
Boston Opportunity Agenda



Neil Sullivan  
Executive Director  
Boston Private Industry Council





## OPPORTUNITY YOUTH (OY)

The term “Opportunity Youth” initially referred to 16–24-year-olds who were out of school and out of work. As communities around the country delved into the work of connecting this population, many expanded the definition to include youth and young adults who are marginally engaged with school or work. The more inclusive definition includes youth who are:

- Out of school and unemployed,
- Enrolled in school, but not showing up regularly and not progressing academically,
- Enrolled in college part-time and either unemployed or marginally employed, and
- Not enrolled in school and only working part-time without benefits.

The transition period between high school and career is especially challenging for young people. Gaps in the system lead to high disconnection rates, particularly for youth of color. Data from the Aspen Institute shows that the disconnection rate nationally among black youth was above 22%, compared to 11% for white youth in 2012.

Structural inequities are also persistent in Boston, where local disconnection rates for black and Latinx youth in 2012 were 19.9% and 18.5%, respectively, compared to 2.9% for white youth. For policymakers and practitioners alike, these substantial disparities demonstrate the pressing need for targeted, systemic interventions.

## NATIONAL & LOCAL CONTEXT

### The White House Council for Community Solutions increases the visibility of opportunity youth.

In 2012, the White House Council for Community Solutions, in partnership with the Aspen Institute, published a report rebranding “disconnected youth” as “opportunity youth.” The report, *Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth*, was a compelling call to action, and started a national movement to increase the visibility of these young people and foster coordinated, system-wide interventions to reconnect them to education, training, and employment. The report focused the spotlight on millions of opportunity youth currently living in the United States, and highlighted four key strategies for addressing structural barriers to their success.<sup>2</sup>

#### STRATEGY ONE

Drive the Development of Successful Cross-Sector Community Collaborations

#### STRATEGY TWO

Shared National Responsibility and Accountability

#### STRATEGY THREE

Engage Youth as Leaders in the Solution

#### STRATEGY FOUR

Build More Robust On-Ramps to Employment

In response, the Aspen Institute took initiative to harness this momentum and nurture the development of education and career pathways for this group, with the goal of providing opportunities for career-level employment and financial independence. In July 2012, Aspen launched the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) to seed collective impact projects in communities around the country.

### Boston’s existing networks allow us to take advantage of national momentum.

Boston is home to a rich ecosystem of public and nonprofit agencies designed to solve community challenges and address gaps in the system that cause and intensify social inequities. By 2012, Boston was home to several collective impact projects and networks organized around particular initiatives for youth and young adults. As a result, the city was primed to coordinate an effort around this population.

A The Aspen Institute. (2018, April 23). Success: There are 1.2 Million Fewer Opportunity Youth. Retrieved from [aspencommunitysolutions.org/success-there-are-1-2-million-fewer-opportunity-youth/](https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/success-there-are-1-2-million-fewer-opportunity-youth/)

At the time, two flagship initiatives were underway in Boston that preceded and continue to drive Boston's work with the OY population. The Youth Transitions Task Force (YTTF), convened in 2004, drew a broad group of stakeholders together to tackle the high school dropout crisis. Meeting monthly, the YTTF raised visibility around dropout prevention and re-engagement by conducting research, making policy recommendations, and piloting innovations in practice. The Success Boston initiative was launched in 2008 with an aspirational goal to double the college completion rate of Boston Public Schools (BPS) graduates, with a specific focus on community college students. A variety of stakeholders came together to implement a four-part strategy—Getting Ready, Getting In, Getting Through, and Getting Connected—to prepare youth to meet the challenges of higher education and career entry.

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**“Opportunity Youth are a key part of our young talent pool and our economic development strategy in Boston.”**

**Martin J. Walsh, Mayor, City of Boston**

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Simultaneously, there were several youth-led initiatives designed for young people to bring solutions of their own to the table. The Boston Student Advisory Council has actively represented youth interests since the establishment of the appointed School Committee. Similarly, the Mayor's Youth Council brings youth to the city planning table to be included in the budgetary process. The Youth Jobs Coalition (now called I Have A Future) was founded in 2009 in response to severe increases in youth unemployment and post-recession budget cuts to spending on youth jobs.

These projects, among others,<sup>B</sup> showed the promise of collective impact as a powerful tool for improving outcomes for youth and convincing major institutions to shift their policies and practices. By 2013, the YTTF and Success Boston initiatives had seen a 57% reduction in the high school dropout rate and a 12% increase in college enrollment,

## LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

The goal of the Youth Transitions Task Force and Success Boston initiatives was not only to test the effectiveness of their interventions, but also to learn more deeply about the institutional changes that would be necessary to bring about transformative change. The Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) piloted dropout outreach in partnership with the Boston Public Schools (BPS), to learn whether dropouts would return to school when given the option, and what the district and its partners could do to better support both re-engagement and prevention. Similarly, the Boston Foundation funded postsecondary navigation coaches to support BPS graduates who were attending college. The goal was to learn whether this support could improve students' success rates and to identify barriers to their success.

respectively.<sup>3</sup> Despite that, substantial inequities persisted, impacting the city's communities of color. In 2012, when the Opportunity Youth movement began in earnest, the dropout rate for white students in the district's public schools was 3.8%, lower than the 4.5% rate for black students and significantly lower than the 5.2% rate for Latinx students. Similarly, 73% of white students graduated from the Boston Public Schools in 2012—a significantly higher proportion than that of black students (64.5%) and that of Latinx students (58.8%).<sup>4</sup>

Local officials and program leaders knew that individual programs alone could not tackle the largest and most intractable challenges. Broad, cross-sector efforts had been effective in serving other populations, such as young people who'd dropped out of high school and students struggling through community college. Despite these successes, Boston hadn't yet built a cross-sector strategy for engaging 20–24-year-olds who were disconnected from school. A coordinated, community-wide solution for this population was needed, and the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund provided resources to pursue that vision.

<sup>B</sup> See Appendix B for a list of collective impact projects and aligned initiatives.

# COLLABORATING FOR IMPACT

## Local funders bring stakeholders together to develop a common agenda.

While Boston was home to a large youth-serving community, these separate efforts were not organized around a shared vision of how to get young people through the transition phase between secondary education and career-level employment. Local funders and concerned stakeholders were eager to find a catalyst to build on the existing foundation of work, while identifying opportunities to advance solutions at scale. Aspen promoted the “collective impact” approach and encouraged communities to use its five components.

- A common agenda to **bring disparate actors together** on a goal.
- **Shared measurement systems for agreement** on whether progress is being made.
- **Mutually reinforcing activities**, or coordination of differentiated activities.
- Continuous **communication among members** over time to **build trust and consensus** on action.

- A **Backbone support organization**, or a strong intermediary to facilitate and manage the initiative.<sup>5</sup>

In 2013, the co-conveners of the Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative—the Boston Opportunity Agenda (BOA) and the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC)—brought together community partners to identify a collective impact approach that could draw on the city’s existing assets.

Early in the process, Collaborative stakeholders realized the need for support in leveraging assets, accessing funding, and engaging a large and diverse stakeholder network. Partners identified the BOA and the PIC to organize planning sessions and community-wide convenings, as well as to support the communications function that would prove essential to sustaining Collaborative engagement. Recognizing the need for a neutral party to create an inclusive engagement and design process, the group involved a skilled community facilitator to moderate planning sessions and full-body convenings.

As the mandate of the Collaborative came into focus, a core planning team emerged to facilitate implementation of the



Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh speaks at the 2017 Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund grantee convening.

group's vision. This team proved essential to the design process and community engagement plan, and the governance infrastructure also helped to organize the Collaborative's work as it moved into the growth phase.

## Collaborative leadership brings partners to the table to plan OYC activities.

As funding for Collaborative activities began to solidify, the co-conveners initiated a participatory research, planning, and design phase, allowing community partners to engage deeply with strategic questions. As a team, partners developed a shared population focus and a shared analysis of the structural barriers that reduced opportunity for the city's youth and young adults. These monthly meetings were designed to allow all Collaborative members opportunities to participate in core decision-making processes.

In parallel, the OYC began to hold large public forums, report releases, and community convenings to increase awareness and foster commitment among key stakeholders. For example, the group convened a Mayoral Candidates Forum held in August 2013, which was followed by a Mayoral Transition Paper that outlined policy recommendations for the newly-elected Mayor to support. Recommendations ranged from expanding the city's dropout prevention and re-engagement efforts to increasing employment and occupational training opportunities for youth and young adults.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, a series of joint convenings with the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy served to elevate the profile of opportu-

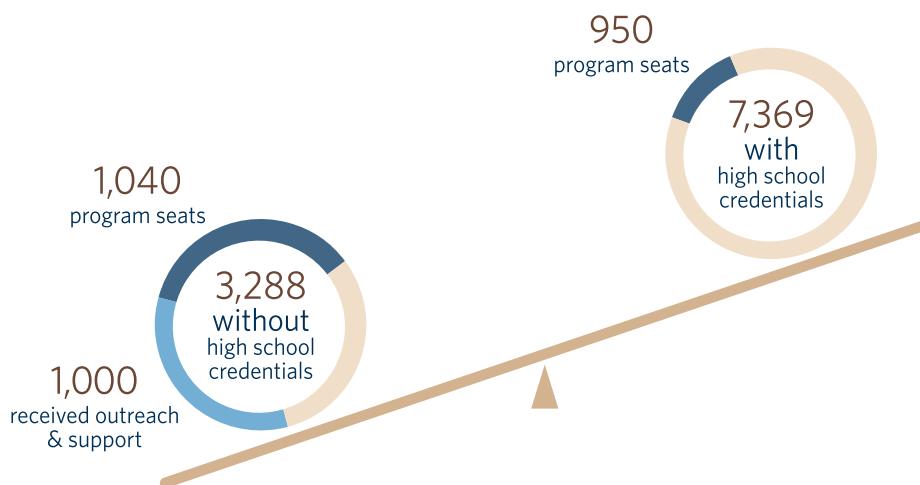
nity youth and introduce this population to the postsecondary and workforce systems. They also began to generate consensus around programmatic and systems level initiatives to support them, deepening engagement among institutional leaders around strategies to promote youth retention and success.

## Partners use data to build a common understanding of Boston's opportunity youth population.

**Most of Boston's opportunity youth had a high school diploma or equivalency, but gaps in the system created barriers to postsecondary and career success.** A review of the 2009–2011 American Community Survey (ACS) data revealed that Boston was home to 11,765 opportunity youth, about 9.6% of the overall 16–24-year-old population. Of these youth, the largest share was between 20 and 24 years old and had earned a high school credential.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, a 2014 landscape analysis showed that there were just over 2,000 program seats for 3,288 youth without a high school credential, but only 950 program seats for over 7,000 youth with their credential. To Collaborative members, this indicated the need for more coordinated programming, and individual nonprofits came to the conversation with an identified need to work together to better align services. As such, the field was ripe with possibilities to create a cohesive, system-wide work plan and bring it to scale.

**FIGURE 2: Pathways: Program capacity for OY in Boston at the start of the initiative**

Census and program data demonstrated a drastic lack of education and job training programming for the large and newly visible population of older OY who have a high school credential.





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“Programs had been so used to recruiting high school dropouts that at first, they did not believe the data that showed Boston having many more high school graduates than dropouts among its Opportunity Youth.”

Don Sands, Executive Director, X-Cel Education

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### Collaborative members build early consensus around centering youth voice in leadership and strategic thinking.

From inception to implementation, a distinguishing feature of the Opportunity Youth Collaborative was its integration of youth leaders in the design and community engagement process. Recognizing the importance of centering youth voice, the Collaborative identified Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) as an early youth partner to develop a team of Youth Voice leaders that would eventually become the Youth Voice Project (YVP). The YVP provided critical input on the design process and collective impact plan, and ultimately became an integral component of the Collaborative, taking on leadership roles at both the local and national levels.

The YVP's role soon expanded to participating in subcommittees and key partner initiatives, such as the BPS-sponsored “Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline” Committee. On its own initiative, the YVP also networked with other youth-led groups in Boston, such as the Youth Jobs Coalition, to advance issues of mutual importance. The YVP has since provided leadership around topics that pertain specifically to opportunity youth, leading campaigns to engage the community in crafting solutions. It has engaged opportunity youth through arts-based advocacy projects that intentionally target structural barriers to success.

To guide the Collaborative's strategy, youth leaders surveyed youth and young adults about their aspirations and the resources they would need to pursue them.<sup>8</sup> The Collaborative learned that the majority of the young people surveyed had left high school and eventually returned to earn their high school diploma or equivalency. A key finding was that many were still struggling to find stable employment and post-

secondary success, and that while youth viewed college as important, they were concerned about the cost, commitment, and navigation skills required to attend and persist. Perhaps most importantly, less than 50% of those surveyed felt that youth had a voice in Boston and wanted the Collaborative to focus on creating outlets for youth to empower themselves. These findings provided direction for advancing the work toward a youth-centered common agenda.

### Community partners work together to design career pathways to learn what is available to opportunity youth—and what isn't.

The early activity that fostered the most buy-in was the pathway design phase. **A career pathway is a series of experiences over time that lead to career-level employment. Pathways can take several years to navigate, and often include some combination of job training, college, internships, jobs, and career exploration opportunities.** During the first year the group discussed reports on the ACS data, the youth input, and local programs. In an iterative process, Collaborative members worked in small groups to map existing school-to-career pathways in Boston. Through this effort, community partners began to understand the city's youth services ecosystem as a collection of unconnected education and training programs—usually provided by different agencies. The goal was to identify programs or processes that were not yet seamless, and work to connect programs and work experiences into true, navigable career pathways.

Youth identified a need to organize the resources available to them in one centralized location in order to reduce complexity and increase access. Young people placed particular emphasis on the need for a one-stop center to be located near public transportation, and on coaching that would help them navigate the administrative barriers to postsecondary success. The top five recommendations that emerged from youth and adults were:

1. A **one-stop center** where OY could learn about education, training, and employment services and get connected to programs that fit their interests and needs.
2. **Life coaches** who could help young people navigate programs and help them with transitions between programs.
3. Supported **pathways through college completion**.

4. Access to **occupational training programs**.
5. **Career exploration programs** to help youth and young adults choose training programs, college majors, and employment experiences that are a fit for them.

After the initial research and design phase, the group voted on how the Collaborative would move forward. The one-stop center won the most support and would focus on the largest portion of the opportunity youth population in Boston— young adults with a high school credential.

### After months of learning and strategizing, the Collaborative comes together around an implementation plan.

Over a period of several months in 2013, the Collaborative was able to secure an Aspen OYIF grant to continue collective impact activities and a SIF<sup>B</sup> Opportunity Works grant to implement career pathway elements. The Collaborative decided to use the funding to pilot the proposed one-stop center—naming it the Connection Center—and to integrate some of the other four elements into its functions and referral pathways. Ultimately, the group chose to implement the Connection Center as a feeder to preexisting local programs. The Connection Center would feature coaches who would provide supported handoffs to coaches or support staff in the receiving programs.

Once funding was secured, the group selected an operator for the Connection Center through a competitive bidding process that created significant interest among members. It attracted eight applicants and engaged a number of youth and adult collaborative members in the selection process. The group chose X-Cel Education, a small, well-respected “Back-on-Track” program that was also an active Collaborative member. Subsequently, the group held another bidding process to identify four high-quality pathway programs. Two

were Back-on-Track programs (College Bound Dorchester and Iniquilinos Boricuas en Acción), one was an employment training program (Jewish Vocational Service’s Pharmacy Technician program), and one was an employment placement program (Asian American Civic Association). The Center would refer youth to a broad variety of opportunities, but the group wanted to ensure that Connection Center referrals received priority admissions at a few core programs.

### “BACK-ON-TRACK” MODEL

As part of the national opportunity youth movement, Jobs for the Future (JFF) highlighted the need for traditional GED and alternative diploma programs to aspire for more than just a high school credential for their participants. JFF studied local programs and helped articulate an evolving model, which it called the “Back-on-Track” model. This model has three phases:

1. enriched GED or diploma preparation, which adds college-preparation to the academic program;
2. college bridging, which brings participants through developmental coursework before enrolling in college;
3. retention support, which helps young people navigate through college once enrolled.

<sup>B</sup> Social Innovation Fund (SIF): a program of federal agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service. The SIF funds intermediaries to identify and fund community-based organizations. The SIF grantees match the funds they receive, and participate in a third-party evaluation.



# THE CONNECTION CENTER

The Connection Center opened its doors in February 2015 and operated through the end of the SIF grant in December 2017. The center provided outreach, assessment, and referral services to the largest segment of Boston's opportunity youth population: 20–24-year-olds who had at least a high school credential, but did not have a postsecondary degree. Through reaching out to young people, engaging with them about their experiences, and supporting them in navigating career pathways, the Collaborative sought to learn more about the experiences and interests of Boston's young adults in order to inform program design and advocacy goals. This chapter describes the Connection Center model, the characteristics of youth served, education and training referrals and outcomes, and challenges and lessons learned.<sup>C</sup>

The Connection Center conducted outreach throughout Boston to recruit young adults to the center for services. During the intake and assessment process, the Connection Center's success coaches helped youth explore which education and/or training programs might fit their interests and skill sets. The Connection Center prioritized referring youth to programs that provide bridging and retention support in accordance with JFF's Back-on-Track model. The Center referred youth to the following types of programs.

- College bridging programs that provide academic instruction to prepare youth to take college-level courses before they matriculate in college, and focus on college retention by providing navigation support on campus for at least the first year of college.
- Colleges and universities.
- Occupational skills training programs designed for young adults, such as Year Up or YouthBuild.
- Training programs designed for adult job seekers that have not historically focused on youth.
- An employment support specialist who worked with youth to draft their resumes and supported them in applying to jobs with Boston-area companies.

Beyond the four programs that the OYC chose to fund, the Connection Center referred youth to other programs that enrolled them using their own funding. Training providers that were eligible for federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I Individual Training Accounts (ITA) funding supported youth in applying. The ITA covers program costs for individual job seekers who need occupational skills training in order to reenter the workforce.

## Youth served by the Connection Center

Center staff met with 502 young people between August 2015 and December 2017, 80% of whom were within the target age range of 20 to 24, about 10% who were 18 or 19,

### WHO THE CENTER SERVED

**Most are U.S. citizens**, with approximately **10%** identifying as **green card holders or on temporary visa**, 10% not specifying their immigration status, and a small number identifying as undocumented.



**23%** lived in **public housing**



**18%** were previously or currently **court-involved**

**9%** were **homeless** or experiencing **housing instability**



**8%** were formerly in **foster care** system

**22%** were **expectant** and/or **parenting**



**29%** participated in a **Department of Transitional Assistance** program

<sup>C</sup> The Connection Center was also part of a nation-wide implementation evaluation of the Social Innovation Fund grantees. The Collaborative shared program data with the Urban Institute and organized interviews with evaluators. The final report shows the common themes between the SIF grantees and is available at [www.urban.org/research/publication/opportunity-works-implementation-report/view/full\\_report](http://www.urban.org/research/publication/opportunity-works-implementation-report/view/full_report).

and 10% who were 25 or 26. The majority (95%) of the youth who visited the Center were people of color, and 46.8% were young men of color. The young people were split evenly between males and females (48% and 50%, respectively), and a small number self-identifying as gender non-binary. As shown in the ACS data presented earlier in this report, racial/ethnic minorities are overrepresented in the opportunity youth population in the city of Boston. The Collaborative set an equity goal to focus on the overrepresented subpopulations, and tracked the demographics of youth visiting the center to measure progress.

Connection Center coaches asked participants about their immigration status, their family situation, and their housing status to learn what supports they might need.

## Education and employment experiences

The Connection Center staff learned about young adults' educational backgrounds and employment experiences to provide appropriate referrals. Youth had to have a high school credential to be eligible to receive services at the Connection Center.<sup>D</sup> Just over half of the youth held a high school diploma from the Boston Public Schools, 19% held a high school diploma from a high school elsewhere in the US, and 17% had earned their high school equivalency. Up to one-half of the youth had enrolled in college previously, and 8% had earned a postsecondary certificate.

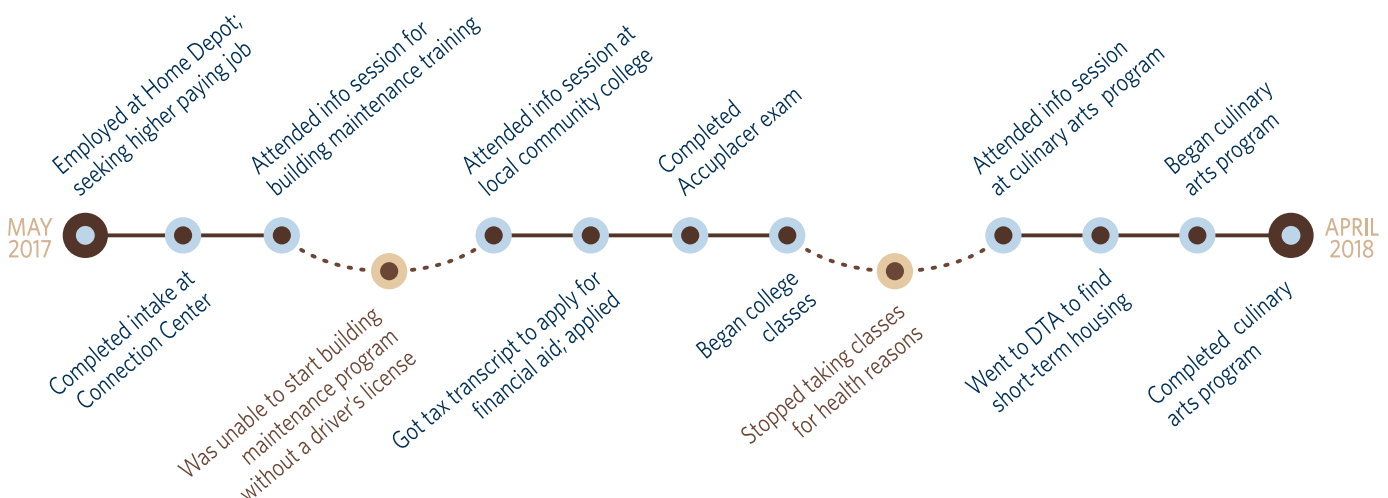
Most of the youth had previous work experience in entry-level retail or food service jobs. When they came to the Connection Center, the majority were either unemployed (46%) or working part-time (31%), with 19% working full-time. Of those who were not working, a large share (58%) indicated having had previous employment, most within the previous three months. While most youth were working or had work experience, few of them were in full-time positions with benefits or clear opportunities for advancement into high-wage employment. Many of the youth visiting the Connection Center would be classified as "marginally engaged" under the opportunity youth definition because they had some form of recent employment, but typically only worked part-time and were not enrolled in education or training.

## Connection Center referrals and program enrollment

To decide where to refer the young people, the Connection Center coaches first had an in-depth conversation with them about their career interests and current situation. Youth shared a wide range of career interests, including specific goals such as investment banking, music, storyboarding for videogames, social work, and software engineering—as well as life milestone goals such as home ownership and starting a business. Some youth completed *Career Cruising*, a career-oriented self-assessment, to help them identify potential career paths.

**FIGURE 2: Example of a Connection Center Participant's Progress**

Based on experiences of participants, but does not portray a specific individual's path.



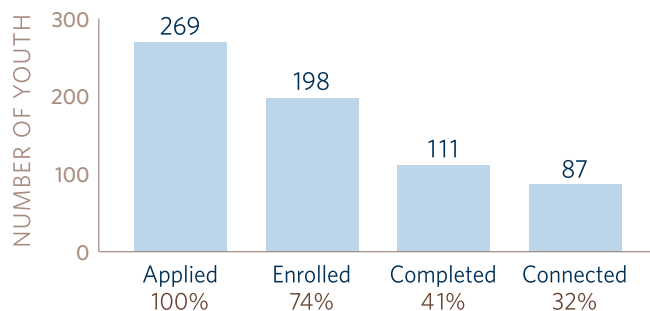
<sup>D</sup> Youth who did not have a high school equivalency were referred to the city's Re-engagement Center or directly to high school equivalency providers.



Following this assessment phase, youth who were interested in taking the next step toward enrolling in a program accompanied coaches to program information sessions to learn more about their options. Coaches also accompanied youth to orientations and interviews, and provided case management support for referred clients. This is referred to as the **“warm handoff,”** and is central to the Connection Center model.

Of the 502 youth who met with a coach, just over half (54%) applied to an education, training, or job placement program, or multiple of these. Of the youth who did not move on to the application phase, some did not continue working with the Center after intake; while others explored program options with a success coach but did not complete a program application. Of the 269 youth who applied to a program, 74% enrolled in a program, 41% have completed the program, and 32% have connected to the next step (see Chart 1). Some of the challenges and barriers to program completion are outlined later in this chapter, and a full list of the programs and schools where Connection Center youth enrolled is in Appendix C.

**CHART 1: Connection Center youth**

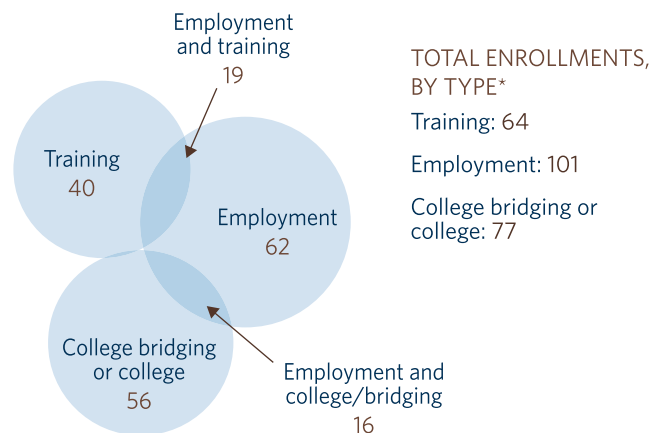


Source: Connection Center program data

Chart 2 shows the number of youth who enrolled by program type. Most young people enrolled in one type of program. However, 19% enrolled in more than one type of program either concurrently or consecutively. Many young people expressed that they needed to work to cover their living expenses. The Connection Center first referred them to employment support and subsequently supported the young person in applying to training or college bridging, which is why the largest shares of overlap are between employment placement and training or college.

**CHART 2: Connection Center youth program enrollment (N=198)**

Each circle represents all of the youth who enrolled in a type of program; the overlap shows youth who enrolled in multiple types of programs during their time working with the Connection Center.



Source: Connection Center program data

\*Please note that the labeled subtotals do not add to the totals listed because a small number of clients enrolled in a program of each of the 3 types.

## Education and employment outcomes

### College bridging

A primary goal for the Connection Center was to help enroll OY in a college bridging program as part of the “Back on Track” framework. 77 participants enrolled or re-enrolled in college or bridging after visiting the Connection Center, with 45 enrolling in a bridging program and 32 enrolling directly into college. Of the 45 participants who enrolled in a bridging program, 30 had not yet enrolled in college as of summer 2018. Most of the 15 youth who had enrolled entered two-year colleges.

### Credentials

15 youth, who started either in a bridging program or directly in college, have completed credentials, all of which are certificates. In the health care-related fields, youth completed certified nursing assistant, central sterile processing technician, and pharmacy technician certificates. In construction, youth completed certificates in carpentry from the North Bennett Street School. Additionally, a small number of youth earned their ServSafe certifications through training programs. Youth who enrolled directly in college may be still

enrolled, but have not completed their programs at the time of this report.

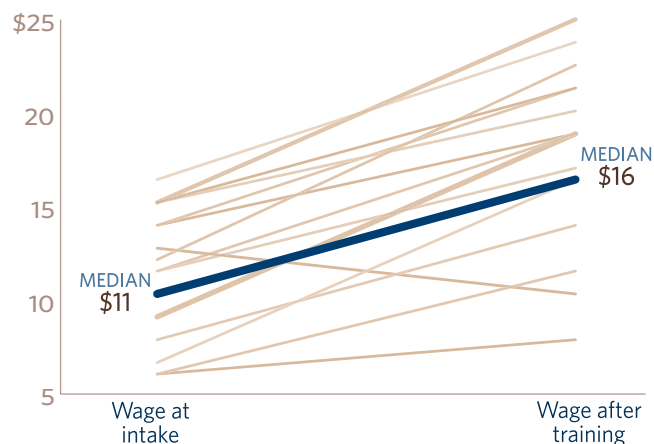
### Employment placement support jobs

Of the 54 youth who found a new job through employment support, just over half started a part-time position. Most (65%) did not include benefits. The jobs were in several different fields, including security, social and human services, retail, and food service. The median starting wage was \$11.50 an hour, with almost all of the positions being in entry-level, minimum wage jobs.

### Employment after training and college

For youth that completed trainings, most found full-time jobs with a substantial wage increase. Of the 29 youth who found jobs after completing training or a college certificate program, 79% were employed full-time and 54% were placed in benefitted positions. Employers were banks, construction companies, hotels, pharmacies, hospitals, nonprofits, and tech companies. The job titles included pharmacy technician, help desk technician, asset manager, systems analyst, certified nursing assistant, and coding instructor. The median starting wage was \$16 an hour. The lowest wage was \$11 an hour, working 30 hours a week. The highest salary was for a full-time position paying \$45,000 a year, with benefits.

**CHART 3: Changes in hourly wages from intake to employment secured after training (N=24)**



*Note: While the Connection Center was operating, the Massachusetts minimum wage increased from \$8.00 in 2014 to \$11.00 in 2017. Many youths' baseline wages were from before the minimum wage increases.*

## Challenges

The Connection Center's ability to help youth access a variety of opportunities provides a sense of possibility in expanding access to career pathways. However, the Connection Center also experienced a range of challenges in recruitment, operations, and reconnecting opportunity youth. The youth encountered various obstacles, which were often intensified by the structural barriers to success for this population.

### Recruitment and Operations

Despite implementing a variety of recruitment activities like door knocking and setting up tables at community events, the number of youth coming to the Connection Center was lower than expected. The average client volume was 15 youth per month, with a low of five and a high of 42.

Staff turnover and the learning curve in developing expertise about training providers and how to access social services for OY also affected program operations and service delivery. The Connection Center also experienced challenges with exerting control over its space, with operations relocated three times during the course of the grant.

### Challenges experienced by the youth

During the course of working with the Connection Center to apply to and complete programs, youth and Connection Center staff identified challenges, the most prevalent of which are detailed below.

1. The Connection Center may not have offered a wide enough range of opportunities to appeal to youth with different desires and goals.
2. Some training programs required youth participants to have a driver's license or a stable living place, which not all the young people applying had.
3. Some youth were experiencing housing instability, including couch-surfing or eviction during programming, which did not always disqualify them for their program of choice, but was a significant challenge.
4. Young parents had difficulty accessing affordable child-care or childcare that would cover the times they needed to complete programming.
5. Youth had challenges with previously unpaid tuition bills and/or completing the FAFSA and accompanying documentation.



6. Some programs and affiliated employers administer drug tests that youth indicated they would be unable to pass.
7. Some youth demonstrated or shared symptoms of diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health issues.
8. Communication challenges were common due to disconnected phone numbers and inconsistent responses from youth engaging with the Connection Center.

Ultimately, the OYC chose not to continue the Connection Center as a stand-alone model when the national grants ended in June of 2018. OYC members are continuing the outreach, assessment, and referral activities for opportunity youth with a high school credential within other projects. The OYC offers the lessons learned from the Connection Center, as well as from the convening, to inform this ongoing work and to guide others who might want to implement this type of service locally or in other cities.

## PATHWAYS & INSTITUTIONAL ENGAGEMENT



Early Youth Voice Project leader Rommel Glover speaks at the launch of the Connection Center.

### Collaborative stakeholders focus on systems change and engaging public institutions.

The Collaborative piloted the Connection Center as both an intervention and a lever for change. The theory of action was that it could leverage existing education and employment programming targeted at other populations if the right supports were built in. For example, if the Collaborative provided a supported referral to adult training programs, opportunity youth would have a greater likelihood of accessing and completing these programs. If youth attended college with the support of a Back-on-Track program, they might be able to navigate through to completion. The OYC also believed that if it could bring young people into these programs and highlight their experiences, institutions would respond to their needs. Engaging program leaders by inviting them to help build the Collaborative's strategy allowed community partners to become invested in the OYC's mission and vision for collective action.

The OYC also developed an engagement strategy to increase the quantity and quality of career pathways available to opportunity youth. The Collaborative began to generate con-

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**“We must attend to our students’ basic needs of food, shelter, and a sense of belonging. Our opportunity youth can do the academic and intellectual work when we take away the barriers.”**

**Dr. Pam Eddinger, President, Bunker Hill Community College**

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sensus around the major institutions with which to partner: the city's two community colleges, Boston's adult-serving workforce development providers, and the Boston Public Schools. The goal was to increase the willingness and capacity of adult workforce training providers to work with young adults, and to increase the number of opportunity youth enrolling in and completing college. Simultaneously, the Collaborative continued to support ongoing efforts to reduce the number of young people leaving high school as dropouts or pushouts. The following is a brief overview of changes that these institutions have made to accommodate the unique needs of opportunity youth.

## Community Colleges

The largest source of postsecondary funding available to opportunity youth is the Federal Pell Grant, the needs-based grant for undergraduate college students. The community colleges' mission of open access, their affordability, and their flexibility position them to provide an entry into postsecondary education or career for opportunity youth. Therefore, the OYF recruited leadership from Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) and Roxbury Community College (RCC) to attend national OYIF convenings to learn more about how their institutional policies and practices might be shifted to improve postsecondary outcomes for OY. In 2014, college leaders joined the Collaborative, bringing themselves into the fold as true partners in the work.

BHCC, Boston's largest community college, has identified and is working towards policies and practices that are more supportive of this population.

- Providing dual enrollment for GED/HiSET programs using the Back-on-Track model, as well as area high schools and districts, that are free of charge to students.
- Minimizing time in developmental education and ESL courses (pre-college level courses that are non-transferable and do not count towards a program of study), through:
  - curriculum alignment projects that provide alternatives to the traditional placement test,
  - English and math acceleration using a co-requisite cluster model<sup>E</sup> that compresses developmental and college-level courses into one semester,
  - integrated skills approach to accelerate ESL using co-requisite cluster model,
  - summer boot camps (intensive skill review to help students prepare for retaking the Accuplacer,<sup>F</sup> with the possibility of placing into higher-level courses) and bridging courses (intensive instruction over the summer to facilitate progression to college-level or upper developmental level courses in the fall) for students who are new to the college, and
  - piloting and scaling a program that allows students to use their high school GPAs to place into college-level courses, instead of taking the Accuplacer.

Additionally, RCC has co-located Year Up—a youth-serving career training program—on its campus to create a more clearly aligned blend of workforce training and postsecondary education. To reduce financial barriers to college completion, the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development established a last-dollar scholarship called Tuition Free Community College in 2016. In 2017, the program opened to students earning a GED or HiSet, making the funding accessible to more of the city's opportunity youth.

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**“What these young people really need are entrees into training, apprenticeships and jobs, because at this point in their lives, they need to be working towards financial independence.”**

**Maddrey Goode, Director, MassHire Boston Career Center**

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## Adult Workforce Development Providers

Another core pathway goal was to get the city's workforce development providers to specifically target and serve opportunity youth. Like many in the community, workforce providers were moved by the ACS statistics cited earlier in this report, and particularly at the misalignment between available program seats and the supports young people need. Although these providers did not have institutional knowledge of opportunity youth, their willingness to be adaptable provided an opportunity for collaboration.

Workforce programs made a strong initial response, and a few took even more steps towards this population. The Asian American Civic Association used the Connection Center as a referral source to test its capacity to serve youth and young adults. AACA had a positive experience in serving this population and provided strong employment services to Connection Center customers. As a result, it successfully applied to become a WIOA youth vendor in 2018 to continue serving opportunity youth. MassHire Boston Career Center, an adult career center, hosted the Connection Center free of charge

<sup>E</sup> This model clusters courses together (i.e. a developmental course with a credit-bearing course, or two aligned developmental courses) into one semester in order to reduce the time students spend in developmental education.

<sup>F</sup> The Accuplacer is a standardized assessment used by community colleges and universities to place students in courses that best fit their learning needs.



for part of its period of operation, as a way to increase its youth and young adult customer base. Since then, it has been partnering with OY-serving agencies to continue working with this population.

### **Boston Public Schools**

In addition to implementing recovery strategies within the postsecondary and workforce systems, it is important to work with public school districts to increase focus on prevention. The BPS now identifies itself as a partner in this work and has included youth leadership in building initiatives and strategic decision-making. The district has committed to prioritizing racial equity and addressing implicit racial bias. Specifically, it has identified the School-to-Prison Pipeline as a major structural barrier to persisting in and finishing school, and has set specific and measurable goals to increase student engagement and decrease punitive discipline.

- Committed to address institutional policies and practices that push students out of school and disproportionately impact youth of color.
  - Hosted six forums on the School-to-Prison Pipeline to provide professional development for BPS staff and to increase community awareness.
  - Co-created the Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline Steering Committee and continued its work with the Code of Conduct Advisory Committee to decrease the suspension rate and increase the use of positive alternatives to punitive discipline.
  - Launched an attendance campaign with a goal of cutting the chronic absentee rate in half over the next five years.
- Demonstrated significant progress, decreasing the out-of-school suspension rate from 5.5% in 2014 to 3.8% in 2017, and continuing the long trend of decreasing the dropout rate to a 2017 low of 3.6%.
- Placed youth in leadership roles in committees and event planning processes.
- Created a Director of Opportunity Youth position to prevent disconnection and reconnect struggling students.

### **An emerging education and training ecosystem is better funded and networked to support Opportunity Youth.**

The primary goal of the Collaborative was to bring a wide variety of youth providers to the same table to enhance

### **SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE**

The School-to-Prison Pipeline refers to the set of academic, school disciplinary, and school climate policies and practices that push students out of school and into the criminal justice system.

coordination throughout the system. Although more work remains to be done, it has created a framework for the youth provider ecosystem to find innovative ways to collaborate. For example, two philanthropic organizations, the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley and the Clipper Ship Foundation, have just created opportunity youth-related funding priorities and learning communities. Like the Collaborative, the United Way's funding portfolio is focused on building out pathways for youth who have a high school credential.

In addition to creating the new funding priority, the United Way partnered with OYC veterans JVS and the PIC, as well as local housing agencies to establish Launch, a state-sponsored project to connect opportunity youth living in public housing with education and career pathways. This initiative uses some of the core connectivity components piloted through the connection center, such as outreach, assessment, referral, and pathway navigation coaching. Still in its beginning phase, the group is also working on integrating youth voice into the planning and implementation processes.

At the federal level, the 2014 reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) set the stage for more local coordination of services for opportunity youth by mandating that most of local WIOA grants be spent on out-of-school youth ages 16-24. There is also a focus on long-term outcomes, such as participation in college or employment. In Boston, the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, an anchor member of the OYC, made the most of this opportunity by encouraging agencies to work together to build pathways. Even as the Collaborative moves into a modified convening model, members hope that the infrastructure that has been built will continue to reduce silos and increase collaboration.

## LESSONS LEARNED & RECOMMENDATIONS



Rahn Dorsey, Chief of Education, and Amanda Shabowich, Youth Voice Coordinator, reflect on OYC accomplishments and goals.

Through intentional convening, this Collaborative has raised the visibility of opportunity youth, engaged community partners, and identified interventions that could leverage existing postsecondary and career pathways for these young people. The group has piloted those interventions and promoted the idea that other stakeholders might take them up as well. With this report, the Collaborative launches into the next phase by making a set of recommendations that addresses several strategies. Some suggest how programs and institutions might adapt, so that opportunity youth could access them more effectively. Others suggest how schools and youth-serving agencies could provide interventions that will help prevent later disconnection. It is both heartening that partners have responded so positively in the early stages, and sobering to realize how much is left to be done. While the Collaborative may need to adapt to sustain itself on local funds, it is essential to continue convening and engaging all of the necessary actors to foster a system-wide commitment to opportunity youth.

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**“We support our youth beyond the GED into college because we understand the brilliance and possibility of the young people we serve and we aren’t afraid to expect greatness from them.”**

**Mark Culliton, Director, College Bound Dorchester**

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## LESSON LEARNED 1

### Career exploration

Like all young people, opportunity youth need a chance to explore their interests in order to set attainable goals and achieve them.

In order to advance into career-level employment, young people often need to explore different career possibilities. Unlike many of their peers, opportunity youth often are not afforded the privilege of being curious and exploring their options. Some youth working with the Connection Center had very concrete career goals, while many others were unsure about a path to pursue. Many attended information sessions hosted by multiple programs to explore options. Still, some did not continue the programs they had enrolled in, or, once they had completed, realized they no longer had an interest in that field, only to shift to another program or employment opportunity.

Though OYC members and Connection Center staff saw the need for programs that provided opportunities for youth to explore different career options before they committed to college or training, there did not seem to be any of these programs available in Boston. While newer, innovative programming is necessary, young people also should be able to access career exploration opportunities while they are in school.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create career exploration programs that allow disconnected young adults to learn about their interests and careers in high-demand fields. **WF, NP, EC**
- K-12 schools, youth development programs, colleges, and alternative education programs should build robust career exposure and skills development into the general curriculum. **BPS, NP, CC, EC**

## LESSON LEARNED 2

### Career pathways

Like their peers, opportunity youth have a diverse range of career development needs—not fully reflected in the services currently available to them.

Though the Pell Grant is the largest source of funding for this age range, many young people have barriers to enrolling in college, and some just choose not to go. Opportunity youth who visited the Connection Center were most interested in a job—many needing funds to support themselves or family members—or in short-term occupational training. For many years, opportunity youth have been given the false choice of working to support themselves and their loved ones or going to college. It is important for Boston to foster different pathways for youth to connect to career-level employment in high-demand fields.

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**“We invest in career programming and internships because we see Opportunity Youth as part of our future workforce.”**

**State Street Corporation**

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Community colleges should increase the number of stackable majors and credentials that lead directly to employment—and more effectively promote them. **CC, EC**
- The employer community should work more diligently with secondary and postsecondary institutions to articulate more paid “learn-to-work” and “work-to-learn” models. **EC**



- c. The City and the Commonwealth should increase funding for occupational training programs and work with employers to develop high-quality training programs in high-demand fields. COB, MA, WFD, EC
- d. All of the above stakeholders should work together to develop innovative models that blend education, training, and work in ways that transcend traditional silos and lead to career-level employment.

### LESSON LEARNED 3

## Training and apprenticeship

### High-quality, career-oriented training programs are not accessible to all opportunity youth.

Many apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships with highly effective service models also have demanding admission requirements. Another pathway element that our youth leaders identified early on was the need for programming to provide them with work experience and the “soft skills” that employers seek in new hires. Given the presence of high-quality, high-expectation training programs, there is a need for programming that can help youth increase their eligibility for these training opportunities. Currently, there are few ways for young people to engage in low-stakes soft skills and executive functioning training.

The primary obstacle to solving this challenge is that currently, funders incentivize programs to funnel youth into college or employment—even if they may be better served by enrolling in another program as a next step. Currently, an “outcome” for most training programs or workforce providers is placement in a job or in higher education. Programs that could provide the skills training mentioned above are more likely to expedite youth through their exploration and skills acquisition process in order to get them counted as a successful placement to meet funding requirements.

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**“For challenges of this scale, it is essential to adopt a collective approach that addresses the full spectrum of need across the population.”**

Monique Miles, Director,  
Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund

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### RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Workforce agencies should offer “on-ramp” programs to prepare youth to succeed in high-quality, high-expectation occupational training programs. These short-term programs prepare youth with soft-skills and executive functioning skills needed to succeed in work, training programs, and school. WFD, CC
- b. Funders should invest in these “on-ramps” and other programs that are connecting youth to the next high-quality opportunity. FC, MA, COB
- c. Funders should utilize multiple measures to assess the effectiveness of programs and include enrollment in more advanced or specialized training programs as a positive outcome. FC, MA, COB

### INITIALS KEY

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COB: City of Boston

EC: Employer Community

FC: Funder Community

MA: State of Massachusetts

NP: (Youth-serving) Nonprofits

WFD: Workforce Development

## LESSON LEARNED 4

# Barriers to college completion

Once enrolled, opportunity youth experience greater structural barriers to persistence and completion than their peers.

While opportunity youth have potential to be successful, institutional policies and practices at the postsecondary level can have the unintended consequence of pushing students out of school. Developmental education courses are a significant obstacle to students continuing their education, and can have a compounding effect on preexisting opportunity gaps. Effective solutions should include strategies to get students into college-level, credit-bearing courses as immediately as possible, as well as building in wraparound supports that are often critical to success for opportunity youth.

Another major barrier to student success is complicated financial aid applications and requirements for financial documentation, which can act as disincentives for students who wish to attend college. Students who are returning to school might find they have unpaid tuition bills and financial holds on their student accounts, preventing them from re-enrolling and completing their studies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Community colleges should continue to partner with GED and alternative diploma programs to strengthen and grow Boston's Back-on-Track model. **CC, BPS, NP**
- b. Colleges, K-12 schools, and education providers should continue to pilot and scale strategies to minimize or eliminate student enrollment in developmental courses. **COB, CC, BPS, NP**
- c. The BPS should recommit to increasing the number, variety, and quality of alternative education programs to ensure best-fit opportunities and greater postsecondary readiness for off-track students with varying profiles. **BPS**
- d. K-12 schools, community colleges, and universities should better align their curriculum and assessments to ensure that college readiness expectations are shared. **CC, BPS**
- e. Community colleges should expand the availability of "last dollar" and "last mile" scholarships that cover the cost of attendance, including tuition, fees, learning materials, and living expenses. **COB, CC, MA, NP**

## LESSON LEARNED 5

# Coordination

The community of youth-serving organizations—both public and private—needs to achieve greater coordination among systems.

The fragmentation of the youth-serving ecosystem forces opportunity youth to navigate a complex pool of disconnected programs. Not only is this an unreasonable expectation of young people, but it largely prevents youth-serving organizations from accessing the real benefits of collaboration. Small organizations experience greater challenges to achieving scale and accessing resources such as large, national funding opportunities. Organizations of all sizes have more difficulty building out referral networks and accessing supportive services, leading to organizations serving young people regardless of whether or not there are other options that better fit their needs. While the work of the Collaborative has built more coordination into the system, there is still significant room for improvement.



Connection Center client Zenobia Cameron receives her certificate for completing JVS' Pharmacy Technician Program.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Public and private funders should create incentives for and remove barriers to collaboration. MA, COB, FC
  - Enable “shared customer” models
  - Use common measures and common database software across systems and funding streams
- b. Funders should support convenings of stakeholders in the collective impact model to coordinate services. FC
- c. An intermediary or government agency should develop a guide to education, career, and social services for opportunity youth, to help programs connect youth to next steps and supplemental services. MA, COB, FC, NP
- d. All stakeholders should seek out opportunities to participate in convenings that allow them to network and coordinate.
- e. One-stop referral centers, education providers, and workforce programs serving opportunity youth should have robust coaching and case-management capacity to provide navigation support and persistence coaching for the duration of the program. WFD, CC, BPS, NP
- f. Organizations should build transition support and warm handoffs into referral networks to help youth move onto the next step on their career ladder. WFD, NP, BPS, CC

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## LESSON LEARNED 6

# Outreach

Based on the Connection Center experience, providers must continue to develop more effective outreach, assessment, and referral strategies for opportunity youth.

Though the Connection Center did succeed in engaging over 500 young people with a high school credential over the three years of the pilot, it did not achieve the kind of scale that the Re-Engagement Center reaches—about 700 annually—even though opportunity youth with a high school credential far outnumber those without. In assessing our model, partners and youth have offered a number of hypotheses.

- The past failures of institutions to engage opportunity youth in good faith may have created mistrust in the city's systems and program offerings.
- The education and career options that currently exist may be misaligned with the needs and desires of youth.
- The Collaborative may not have generated strong enough outreach and recruitment strategies to engage the target population.
- The Connection Center may not have been properly marketed to youth who needed it.
- No one agency or institution keeps track of the thousands of opportunity youth after they graduate or obtain a GED.
- Economic inequities burden opportunity youth with financial and geographic obstacles to success.
- Institutional racism and marginalization intensify social and emotional barriers to youth seeking out services.

This focus on the young adult opportunity youth population is still new, which highlights the need to keep pushing on both the reconnection and prevention fronts. We must continue to explore why recruitment is challenging, and bring solutions to the table—particularly for black and Latinx youth. Along with prevention strategies, this will help to reduce the rates of disconnection for the most marginalized of the opportunity youth population.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. The OYC should continue to support and monitor the outcomes for outreach, assessment, and referral of opportunity youth with a high school credential to inform pathway development. OYC
- b. Institutions and programs should develop outreach and connection strategies for specific segments of this population, such as college stopouts, disconnected high school graduates, and public housing residents. NP, WFD, CC, FC
- c. High schools, colleges, and workforce providers should increase coordination to build referral systems that keep youth connected to education or career-oriented employment. CC, WFD, NP, BPS
- d. Career Centers, in their work with youth and young adults, should designate staff who understand the unique barriers faced by this population. WFD
- e. Researchers should follow up on youth leadership's work to learn more about how to reach out to young people more effectively, and what kind of education and training opportunities would interest them. CC, WFD, NP, BPS

## LESSON LEARNED 7

# Wellness

Educational and workforce pathways should focus on building social-emotional competencies and strong connections to social and health supports.

Many of the young people who worked with the Connection Center were also navigating housing instability, immigration status challenges, and/or health issues. For youth who were parenting, it was a challenge to balance the time and financial needs of raising a family with the time and logistical requirements of an education or training program. These challenges had an impact on the ability of young people to realize their full potential, and the Connection Center was underprepared and ill-equipped to address the myriad of structural barriers to success for opportunity youth.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Education and workforce agencies should provide robust connections to social service agencies that address common needs among opportunity youth, including housing and food insecurity, childcare, immigration support, and mental health support. **BPS, CC, WFD**
- b. A future Connection Center or any similar outreach and referral program should partner with public health and medical institutions, as well as train staff in mental health assessment, so that they can discern when to refer a young person to access appropriate healthcare. **WFD, CC, NP**
- c. Career navigators for youth should be embedded in or connected to an agency that provides social services, so the navigator can refer young people to housing, immigration, childcare, or other supports. **WFD, NP**
- d. Boston should implement a directory of supportive social and health services that tracks data points like services provided and quality of care so that providers can create direct referral pathways to address client needs that they don't have internal capacity to meet. **COB, WFD**
- e. The BPS should continue its efforts to replace unnecessary use of punitive discipline with positive school culture, social emotional learning, and positive approaches like restorative justice. **BPS**
- f. Public and private institutions should access and create funding streams for supportive services to subsidize young people's basic financial needs as they move through their training or educational programs, allowing young people to focus on their goals. **FC, CC, WFD**

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## NEXT STEPS

The Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative will continue this work in a modified convening structure to implement shared goals and coordinated, system-wide strategies.

The Opportunity Youth Collaborative believes that there is momentum around this population, and intends to capitalize on it by sustaining the convening, even after the largest national grants have ended. As outlined in chapter 4, institutions are beginning to respond to this population, spurred by the national movement, the Collaborative's work locally, and the efforts of others. The continuing work of the OYC is just one strategy for building the sort of ecosystem that is needed to support success for opportunity youth in Boston. We are relying on these institutions to continue the momentum and take ownership over their role in improving career pathways for Boston's young adults.

The plan, therefore, is to continue convening the larger learning community biannually to consider the whole population of disconnected 16–24-year-olds, to reflect on new and existing strategies, and to measure progress. Furthermore, existing coalitions that focus on specific segments of this population—such as high school dropouts—as well as those involved in advocacy around related policy issues and youth-led advocacy groups are invited to join with the Collaborative. Each group is welcome to contribute to the greater goal of dramatically reducing the number of disconnected youth through the pursuit of its own intentional goals. The vision is for the convenings to feature a report-out on progress, including that of each coalition.

### The Collaborative will take the following steps to advance the work.

- Invite existing collective impact projects focused on youth and young adults to join a system-wide opportunity youth convening to share promising practices and coordinate shared goals.
- Continue to foster participatory decision-making among stakeholders and continue the culture of inclusion.
- Work with institutional and agency leaders to implement the recommendations in this report and use public forums to continue engaging the greater Boston community and for its support.
- Share common tools and language around college and career preparation with the school district and community-based education providers.
- Conduct research on new and existing practices and their impact.
- Measure progress on reducing the youth and young adult disconnection rate, using population-level trends in education and employment, with a focus on specific subgroups that are traditionally the most disconnected.
- Continue to create more customized and nuanced measures that allow for adapting programming to better serve OY.
- Continue to engage youth leadership in guiding collective impact strategies and activities to foster constituent-centered solutions.
- Leverage allied initiatives and partners to continue to pilot outreach, assessment and referral of opportunity youth to education and career programs to better understand where the gaps in the system are.
- Develop a public policy platform and advocacy strategy to support implementation of these recommendations.

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**“Youth Voice is not being afraid to voice your opinions, demanding adult-dominated spaces incorporate the ideas and thoughts of young people—being a part of the decision making that impacts us and our peers. It requires courage, a platform to be heard, collaboration, and love.”**

Amanda Shabowich, Coordinator,  
Youth Voice Project

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

*Note: Recommendations that are listed twice are opportunities for collaboration within and across systems.*

## Boston Public Schools

- Build robust career exposure and skills development into the general curriculum
- Recommit to increasing the number, variety, and quality of alternative education programs to ensure best-fit opportunities and greater postsecondary readiness for off-track students with varying profiles
- Work with community colleges and universities to better align curriculum and assessments to ensure that college readiness expectations are shared
- Develop robust coaching and case-management capacity to provide navigation and persistence support through graduation and a warm handoff to postsecondary education or training
- Increase coordination to build referral systems that keep youth connected to education or career-oriented employment
- Continue following up on youth leadership's work to learn more about conducting outreach to young people more effectively, and what kind of education and training opportunities would interest them
- Provide robust connections to social service agencies that address common needs among opportunity youth, including housing and food insecurity, childcare, immigration support, and mental health support
- Continue efforts to replace the unnecessary use of punitive discipline with positive school culture, social emotional and positive approaches, like restorative justice
  - In particular, continue to develop and monitor appropriate measures to evaluate progress on decreasing punitive discipline and increasing student engagement

## Community Colleges

- Increase number of stackable majors and credentials that lead directly to employment—and more effectively promote them
- Build robust career exposure and skills development into the general curriculum
- Offer “on-ramp” programs to prepare youth to succeed in high-quality, high-expectation occupational training programs
- Continue to partner with GED and alternative diploma programs to strengthen and grow Boston's Back-on-Track model
- Continue to pilot and scale strategies to minimize or eliminate student enrollment in developmental courses
- Expand the availability of “last dollar” and “last mile” scholarships that cover the cost of attendance, including tuition, fees, and learning materials, and living expenses
  - Additionally, offer “small dollar” grants to cover unpaid tuition bills, emergency expenses, and basic needs
- Work with K-12 schools and universities to better align curriculum and assessments to ensure that college readiness expectations are shared
- Develop robust coaching and case-management capacity to provide navigation and persistence support through graduation and a warm handoff to employment or a four-year college
- Continue following up on youth leadership's work to learn more about conducting outreach to young people more effectively, and what kind of education and training opportunities would interest them
- Provide robust connections to social service agencies that address common needs among opportunity youth, including housing and food insecurity, childcare, immigration support, and mental health support
- Partner with public health and medical institutions, as well as train staff in mental health assessment so that they can discern when to refer a young person to access appropriate healthcare
- Access and create funding streams for supportive services to subsidize young people's basic financial needs as they move through their training or educational programs, allowing young people to focus on their goals

## Workforce Development

- Create career exploration programs that allow disconnected young adults to learn about their interests and careers in high-demand fields
- Increase funding for occupational training programs and work with employers to develop high-quality training programs in high-demand fields
- Offer “on-ramp” programs to prepare youth to succeed in high-quality, high-expectation occupational training programs
- Develop robust coaching and case-management capacity to provide navigation support and persistence coaching for the duration of the program
- Build transition support and “warm” handoffs into referral networks to help youth move onto the next step on their career ladder
- Develop outreach and connection strategies for specific segments of this population, such as college stopouts, disconnected high school graduates, and public housing residents
- Designate staff who understand the unique barriers faced by this population
- Continue following up on youth leadership’s work to learn more about conducting outreach to young people more effectively, and what kind of education and training opportunities would interest them
- Provide robust connections to social service agencies that address common needs among opportunity youth, including housing and food insecurity, childcare, immigration support, and mental health support
- Partner with public health and medical institutions and train staff in mental health assessment so that they can discern when to refer a young person to access appropriate healthcare
- Connect to an agency that provides social services or embed those services in-house, so that navigators can refer young people to the supports they need
- Implement a directory for supportive services that tracks data points like services provided and quality of care so that providers can create direct referral pathways to address client needs that they don’t have internal capacity to meet
- Access or create funding streams of supportive social and health services to subsidize young people’s basic financial needs as they move through their training or educational programs, allowing young people to focus on their goals

## Employer Community

- Create career exploration programs that allow disconnected young adults to learn about their interests and careers in high-demand fields
- Build robust career exposure and skills development into the general curriculum
- Work more diligently with secondary and postsecondary institutions to articulate more paid “learn-to-work” and “work-to-learn” models
- Increase funding for occupational training programs and work with employers across the industry to develop high-quality training programs in high-demand fields
- Work to develop innovative models that blend education, training, and work in ways that transcend traditional silos and lead to career-level employment

## Funder Community

- Provide support to “on-ramps” and to other programs that are connecting youth to the next high-quality opportunity
- Utilize multiple measures to assess the effectiveness of programs and include enrollment in more advanced or specialized training program as a positive outcome
- Create incentives for and remove barriers to collaboration
  - Enable “shared customer” models
  - Use common measures and common database software across systems and funding streams

- Support convenings of stakeholders in the collective impact model to coordinate services
- Develop a guide to education, career, and social services for opportunity youth, to help programs connect youth to next steps and supplemental services
- Create funding streams for supportive services to subsidize young people's basic financial needs as they move through their training or educational programs, allowing young people to focus on their goals

## City & State Government

- Increase funding for occupational training programs and work with employers to develop high-quality training programs in high-demand fields
- Provide support to “on-ramps” and to other programs that are connecting youth to the next high-quality opportunity
- Utilize multiple measures to assess the effectiveness of programs and include enrollment in more advanced or specialized training program as a positive outcome
- Continue to pilot and scale strategies to minimize or eliminate student enrollment in developmental courses
- Expand the availability of “last dollar” and “last mile” scholarships that cover the cost of attendance, including tuition, fees, and learning materials
- Create incentives for and remove barriers to collaboration
  - Enable “shared customer” models
  - Use common measures and common database software across systems and funding streams
- Develop a guide to education, career and social services for opportunity youth, to help programs connect youth to next steps and supplemental services

# BOSTON'S COLLECTIVE IMPACT PROJECTS & ALIGNED INITIATIVES

## Cross-Sector Collective Impact Projects

### Youth Transitions Task Force (YTTF)

The Youth Transitions Task Force draws a broad group of stakeholders together to tackle the high school dropout crisis. The YTTF raises visibility around dropout prevention and reengagement by conducting research, making policy recommendations, and piloting innovative changes in practice. The group piloted outreach to dropouts—which grew into one of the nation's first Re-Engagement Centers.

### Success Boston

The Success Boston initiative was launched in 2008 with a goal to double the college completion rate of Boston Public Schools (BPS) graduates. Stakeholders came together to implement a four-part strategy—Getting Ready, Getting In, Getting Through, and Getting Connected—to prepare youth to meet the challenges of higher education and career entry. The initiative's signature feature is postsecondary coaching, which helps BPS graduates navigate college requirements.

### The Hyams Foundation

The Hyams Foundation convened and supported Teen Futures, a network of alternative education programs promoting education, job readiness, and life skills for youth out of school and out of work.

### High Risk Youth Network (HRYN)

The Black Ministerial Alliance brought faith-based and community-based agencies together over ten years ago to address the impact of violence and trauma on youth in the community through the High Risk Youth Network. Currently, Mass Housing convenes this group to promote best practices in these areas.

### United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley

The United Way convened the Road to Opportunities Initiative, focused on enhancing education and career pathways. They are now implementing Launch, an outreach, assessment and referral initiative that aims to provide Opportunity Youth in public housing with their first steps into career. Funded by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, the initiative includes several local implementation partners.

### B-SET

B-SET, convened by Mass Advocates for Children, is a collaborative project focused on successful transition to adulthood for youth and young adults with disabilities. The goal for this project is to increase employment, education, career, and independent living opportunities for young people with disabilities in Boston.

### Code of Conduct Advisory Council

The Code of Conduct Advisory Council (COCAC) organizes parents, students, advocates and community partners to collaborate with the Boston Public Schools (BPS) to improve disciplinary policies and promote positive school climate. COCAC advises the BPS on discipline issues and the Code of Conduct, evaluates implementation, and promotes the use of alternatives to school exclusion, such as restorative justice.

### Boston Youth Service Network (BYSN)

BYSN is a coalition of community-based agencies that provide education and career services to opportunity youth.

## Youth Leadership

### Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC)

The Boston Student Advisory Council has actively represented youth interests since the establishment of the appointed School Committee. The group focuses primarily on issues that are impacting young people currently within the city's public school system, such as school discipline and school climate.

### The Mayor's Youth Council

The Mayor's Youth Council brings youth to the city planning table to be intentionally included in decision-making on how to spend \$1 million in the city's annual budget.

### I Have a Future

I Have A Future was founded as the Youth Jobs Coalition in 2009 in response to severe increases in youth unemployment and post-recession budget cuts to spending on youth jobs. Since then, I Have A Future has grown to take on issues of juvenile justice in addition to youth employment.

### Teen Empowerment

The Center for Teen Empowerment, Inc. helps low-income, urban youth hone their understanding of the social problems they face and use their talents and skills to create change in their own lives and communities. Teen Empowerment employs youth ages 14 - 21 as leaders that positively influence the values and behaviors of their peers. Their main goal is reducing crime, violence, and self-destructive behaviors.

### Opportunity Youth United: Boston Community Action Team

Opportunity Youth United launched the first Community Action Team in Boston to connect OY with local and national advocacy initiatives. The National Council of Young Leaders' recommendations for policy and practice guide the local teams in their effort to increase opportunity and decrease poverty for young people.



# DESTINATION PROGRAMS FOR CONNECTION CENTER CLIENTS

Asian American Civic Association

- Banking & Finance Program
- Building Energy Efficient Maintenance Skills Program
- Employment Center

Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology (BFIT)

Boston Education, Skills & Training (BEST) Hospitality Training Program

Boston Career Link

Bridgewater State University

Building Pathways

Bunker Hill Community College

College Bound Dorchester

East Boston Neighborhood Health Center

Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) Program

Endicott College

Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción

Job Corps

Jewish Vocational Service (JVS)

- Bridges to College Biotechnology Pathway
- Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) Training Program
- Pharmacy Technician Training Program

Kroc Center Culinary Arts Program

LSG Sky Chefs

Match Beyond

New England Center for Arts & Technology

New England Tractor Trailer Training School (NETTTS)

Newbury College

North Bennett Street School (NBSS)

Partners in Career and Workforce Development (PCWD)

Health Care Training and Employment Program

Quincy College

Resilient Coders

Roxbury Community College

University of Massachusetts Boston

X-Cel Education

Year Up

YMCA Inc.

YouthBuild Boston

# ENDNOTES

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Brandon Siah, former REC client, is currently studying Health and Information Technology at Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology.

# NOTES



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It was authored by a committee of Collaborative members, including Kristin McSwain of the Boston Opportunity Agenda, Kathy Hamilton of the Boston Private Industry Council, Sarah Link of the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, Cameron Mendes-Moreau of the Boston Private Industry Council, Amanda Shabowich of the Youth Voice Project, Nahir Torres of The Hyams Foundation, and Anika Van Eaton of the Boston Private Industry Council.

