

Improve the quality of education for all students

Introduction

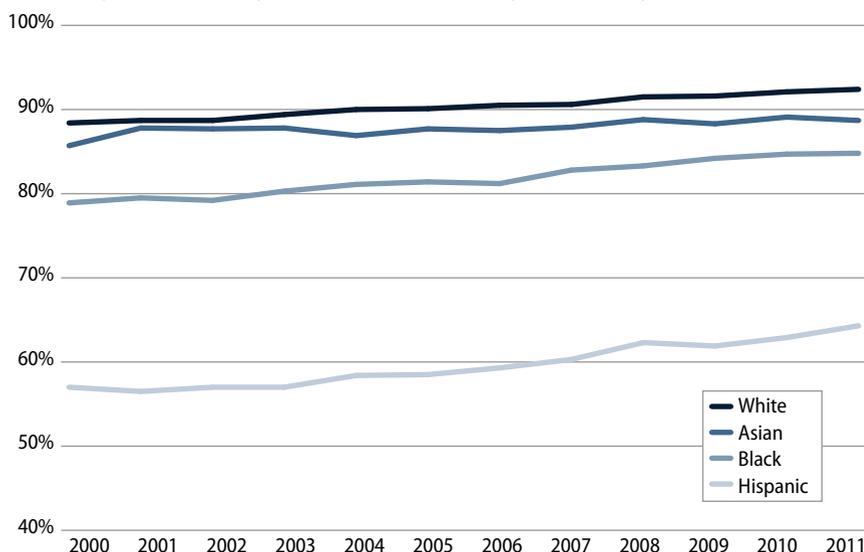
In 1848 Horace Mann wrote “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men.”¹ These words resonate even today. Strong public education is the lynchpin of high-road cities. Excellent schools attract young families, build the skills of future workers, and reduce costs of social services and criminal-justice systems. On the other hand, weak schools undermine property values, reinforce ruinous inequality, and provide weaker human capital for future development. In addition, the location of schools directly drives housing markets, neighborhood quality, and transportation systems.

At best, public schools help counteract our nation’s ruinous inequalities. At worst, they exacerbate the social problems they inherit. The quality of local schools and the vibrancy of cities are linked.

While public schools are of tremendous importance to cities, most city governments have no direct control over the school systems that serve their citizens. School taxes add to the local tax burden and school district decisions influence infrastructure and other costs for cities. The reverse is true as well: Local gov-

FIGURE 9
The educational achievement gap

Percentage of persons ages 25 and over with a high school degree or equivalent



Source: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_008.asp

ernment decisions about infrastructure, planning, zoning, and transportation affect school districts with little to no control over these areas. And despite these close links, schools and cities, with unique governance, have not always worked together on common issues.

The good news is that the strength of the common interest is increasingly overcoming the tradition of separation. Throughout the nation, partnerships and innovation are bringing new models and success. This chapter covers options to improve schools beginning with efforts to provide or enhance pre-kindergarten education; ways to reconnect with youth who are at risk of leaving or have already left the school system; and community partnerships that extend the value of school.

In addition, many of the topics covered in other chapters of this book are relevant to public education. For example:

- The siting of schools should incorporate good land-use policy (see the infrastructure chapter).
- The location and type of housing in the attendance area is important to schools; the housing chapter suggests tools to build stronger neighborhoods via housing policy.
- School districts, similar to any other building owner, can save money with energy efficiency, renewable energy, water efficiency, and good stormwater management (see the infrastructure chapter).
- The health of students affects their educational performance, and schools can improve the health of young people (see the health chapter).
- School districts are major employers, and they should consider the policies outlined in the job quality chapter and their role as anchor institutions (see economic development chapter).

In addition, school districts should be proactive about abating health hazards—such as polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, asbestos, lead, and toxic mold—in school buildings and ensuring sufficient operational budgets to maintain safe and healthy school environments. Of course, there are many public school issues we simply cannot include here. For instance, we do not cover school funding, and we leave out curriculum and its reform—a subject far too vast to cover here. We focus instead on ways that cities and school districts can support children and families and foster stronger communities. The recommendations in this chapter apply to both cities and school districts in most cases.

Promote and support early care and education, including universal pre-kindergarten

Background

The foundation for learning is established in a child's earliest years. High-quality early education is an investment with real payoffs, as it establishes a foundation for success in one's school career and life. But too often working families with young children struggle to find high-quality and affordable early care and education. Child care assistance can help, yet federal and state child care assistance serves only one in six eligible children.² Meanwhile, the child care and early learning workforce—which remains a key career opportunity for many women—is one of the lowest-paid in the country, making it difficult to recruit and retain a stable and skilled workforce.

The benefits of investing in our young children are clear. Early childhood education is a critical investment for communities, and failing to invest in quality early education costs more in the long run.³ In terms of promoting equity, the National Institute for Early Education Research has found that pre-K programs could cut the achievement gap by 40 percent.⁴ In economic terms, a national universal pre-K program would result in annual benefits exceeding annual costs within nine years of program implementation. Overall benefits of a national program could exceed costs by an 8-to-1 ratio, based on budget savings, increased earnings, and reduced crime.⁵ Research also demonstrates that publicly funded, large-scale pre-K programs have strong potential “as a strategy for school reform and turning around a record of underachievement.”⁶

Universal pre-K programs have significant public support, too: A majority of Americans favor candidates and programs that support universal pre-K.⁸

While pre-K is a critical state issue—currently 11 states lack a state law requiring 4-year-olds to attend kindergarten—local government leaders can also play an important role in the promotion and support of universal pre-K, and take other steps to invest in early care and education by:

A majority of Americans favor candidates and programs that support universal pre-K.

The achievement gap

The achievement gap is the persistent and pervasive difference in multiple types of educational achievement, observed starting in infancy and continuing into the high school and college years between young people of different races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes. In the United States, children who are black, Latino, or from low-income families are significantly less likely to do well in school and to graduate high school than their white, more affluent peers.⁷

- Coordinating with school district and early childhood leaders to create a framework for universal early learning that prioritizes an integrated approach to early care and learning for children from birth to age 5. It should recognize the needs of working families for full-day, full-year services, and include city-based strategies to establish and measure success on the pre-K to third-grade educational pipeline.
- Working with key partners to improve the knowledge, skills, and education of early care and education teachers by supporting and rewarding teachers for improving their skills and qualifications; raising compensation and other efforts to decrease turnover and stabilize the workforce; and bringing postsecondary education systems and the early childhood system in a region together to measure and build the skills of the early childhood workforce.

Promote and support universal pre-K

Pre-K programs focus not on direct learning but on play-based curricula, which is proven to help children develop the physical, social, and learning skills to succeed in school.

Pre-K is part of good early childhood development, or ECD, which improves educational achievement, health, employment, and earnings, while decreasing welfare dependency, drug use, and criminal activity. ECD initiatives are a proven alternative to more traditional economic development because ECD investments provide long-term benefits—both financial and social—that far exceed their costs.⁹

Local leaders can start on pre-K by knowing these facts, seeking chances to promote the collaboration necessary to build quality universal pre-K, and looking for places where their leadership, partnership, and resources might help ensure success of a local pre-K strategy.

Ensure quality pre-K through coordination and funding

One major challenge in implementing universal pre-K is the lack of any comprehensive governance structure for early childhood education. Declining state revenues and financially strapped schools also make new programs for quality early education programs harder to build.

Pre-K programs have seen increased enrollment in the past decade, but the amount spent per student has fallen; concurrently, most states' programs have seen a drop in program quality during this period.¹⁰ Funding is the most important factor to ensuring program quality in pre-K. Local policymakers and community leaders should therefore work to prioritize and support investment in early education programs.

Leaders at the school district and city levels should coordinate to create a local framework for approaching early learning. Such efforts should bring in principals, teachers, administrators, school boards, teachers, parents, and community partners. With strong municipal leadership, such a partnership can determine the early education needs of the community and make plans to implement the best policy options for existing program structures.

Coordination with funders allows municipalities to dedicate the necessary resources to establish and improve early education programs. Many local areas benefited from American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding in 2010 and 2011; in fact, without this funding, pre-K spending per child would have been at its lowest level in 10 years.¹¹ Approximately \$500 million in federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge funds have been allocated to nine states, and round two of the funding is now in process. Private funding in this arena is widely available too, though national and local funders are most likely to support evidence-based, quality educational practices.

One example of city-level efforts is to strengthen the connection between pre-K and elementary education. Several cities are creating a pre-K to third-grade “educational pipeline” to ensure a continuum of quality education beyond just the one or two years of pre-K, and to combine advocacy efforts with a common platform: universal pre-K, full-day kindergarten, and a seamless curriculum from pre-K through third grade.¹²

The Seattle PreK-3rd Partnership unites Seattle Public Schools, the city of Seattle, and the New School Foundation to achieve an ambitious five-year action plan. To be completed by 2015, the plan's vision is that all kids will be ready for kindergarten and will be at or above grade level upon leaving third grade.¹³

Keep in mind that the cities that took this new approach leveraged significant private foundation funding.

Promote standardized pre-K teacher training and certification

Teacher training and quality are essential to ensuring quality pre-K education. That's why cities should help ensure that teachers and pre-K staff complete specialized education and training applied in experiential settings. This training will help early childhood professionals develop curriculum that is effective, inclusive, and culturally relevant, so that they can address the unique needs of all children in the classroom.

Such programs are most effective when baccalaureate, graduate, or community schools set the standards for initial or advanced teacher licensure to ensure training will be consistent across a variety of institutions.¹⁴ The National Association for the Education of Young Children, or NAEYC, sets the standard via its accreditation of programs. Their selected programs enumerate and develop early childhood professional understanding of core standards.¹⁵

Madison, Wisconsin, is the only city in the country to create and maintain its own accreditation program for child care centers. In 1975 the city adopted a voluntary accreditation process for both center- and home-based child care providers, using established quality standards to promote optimal child development. The city wanted to ensure that its accredited centers provided quality services so child care providers can “access training, consultation and funding from the City to meet accreditation standards.”¹⁶ This process includes an extensive relationship-based review process.

Madison also pairs the program with child care subsidies, so that families who receive financial assistance can access high-quality, locally accredited child care. NAEYC consulted with Madison in the development of their standards. The Madison Metropolitan School District recently implemented universal 4-year-old kindergarten, using 23 public school sites and 31 private centers to provide this service; all providers are measured using the city standards.

Create avenues for family involvement

Parent and family involvement in pre-K and early childhood programming is also essential to a child's success. For school programs, working with families whose children are in pre-K helps establish a base of communication and support for students at the beginning of their schooling that can last for years. School and other local leaders can achieve the successful integration of families by helping articulate social and academic expectations of children entering kindergarten.¹⁷

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Targeted initiatives coordinated with municipal leaders and organizations with deep and longstanding community ties have proven successful to increase family involvement in children's early education. The United Way's Parent-Child Home Program provides educational kits and one-on-one mentoring to low-income and minority parents of kids in public pre-K. Funded by United Way and others to help narrow the achievement gap among entering kindergarteners, the initiative helps parents understand how to use books and other accessible tools to build literacy and critical-thinking skills of young kids.

The Educare model, offered at 17 schools around the country, provides comprehensive services and education from birth to kindergarten in full-day, year-round programs. Building on the public model of Head Start, Educare requires higher levels of teacher education and smaller classroom sizes, while targeting family retention as a key goal.

Educare parents are empowered as champions of their children's education, and they participate in meetings throughout their child's five-year participation in the program. Parents have access to on-site support, including career services and medical, dental, and behavioral-health services.

Initial research shows that low income and limited-English-proficiency Educare students who attend for a full five years enter school with skills comparable to those of their more advantaged peers.¹⁸ Educare schools are administered through public-private partnerships in each city where they are located, with significant support from Head Start and Early Head Start, as well as national and local foundations.

Partnerships to strengthen K-12 education

Background

Great public education is an essential element of the high road for cities. The public K-12 system is critical but also complex and politically contentious. There is no silver bullet for reform. And while there is significant local control of schools, real reform often hinges on federal and state control over everything from standards to funding formulas. Further, the broader social context of poverty or lack of jobs in a community can overwhelm even the most valiant of efforts inside schools.

Even so, there are many ways that communities can work to improve their schools—the quality of education, the performance of students, and eliminating the achievement gap that confronts even relatively strong school systems.

We highlight partnerships here that can be led within schools or new partnerships between schools and other local leaders. We focus on examples that engage teachers, their unions, and parents in ways that help improve school performance. And we focus on efforts that require new partnerships or new ways of thinking but not necessarily new resources.

In this work, leaders should seek to:

- Enlist teachers in finding innovative solutions to school problems by building and supporting successful, long-term partnerships between districts, teachers, and their unions.
- Enlist parent involvement in and commitment to schools and their children’s success by truly engaging parents as partners in making schools work.
- Focus on retaining new teachers by building supportive workplaces and career pathways for teachers.
- When schools need to improve, build a strong community commitment to schools with teachers, parents, administrators, unions, and community leaders all focused and provided with resources to take on and solve school problems.

Union partnerships

Teachers are essential to good schools and are consistently devoted to making schools work for their students. There are many good examples of partnerships between district management, school boards, and unions, with all parties working together to improve working and learning conditions, teaching quality, and student performance. Success is built in schools, but local leaders can encourage and support the needed local partnerships between districts and their teachers.

Upon reviewing examples of successful partnerships, the Center for American Progress determined several key factors that contribute to successful, long-term partnerships between school districts and teachers unions:

- **Systems:** Reform cannot look at only one aspect of the education system. It must at least consider curriculum, professional development, teaching quality,

evaluation, compensation, hiring and retaining quality professionals, school management, site-based decision making, budgeting, and student performance. Looking at just one or two of these is not likely to be successful in the long term

- **Shared decision making:** Formal structures at both the district and school level to provide a venue for labor and management discussion and collaboration are important.
- **Quality:** The quality of teaching and student performance should be central to the conversation.
- **Peer networks:** Unions need to build the capacity to provide peer-to-peer support, not just on traditional labor-organizing issues, but also on improving instructional quality.
- **Culture:** A strong culture of collaboration should inform decision making and hiring decisions, and labor-management teams should have the opportunity to train and learn together.
- **Broad support:** The partnership needs the support of school boards, national unions, and the community.
- **Stability:** The longevity of leadership contributes to the duration of a successful partnership.

While short-term collaboration on individual projects can be important, long-term success depends on the institutionalization of collaboration.¹⁹ To fully embrace this work, both teachers and administrators are challenged to take on new issues and deal with each other and those issues in new ways.

The ABC Unified School District, which serves the communities of Artesia, Cerritos, and Hawaiian Gardens in Southern California, is an example of a successful long-term collaboration. In 1993 the ABC Federation of Teachers went on strike over plans to cut teacher pay and benefits. In the aftermath of the strike, the union worked to elect school-board members open to collaboration and to get the board to hire a superintendent willing to work with the union. Starting in 1999, the district and the union launched the South Side Schools Reading Collaborative, a targeted intervention in six schools to improve student performance via professional development, improved curriculum and instructional practices, and hiring and retaining quality teachers. The success of this project led to additional collaboration on a range of instructional, training, curricular, and administrative issues. This work has led to improved outcomes for students as well: The district is consistently at least 7 percent above the state average on the California Academic Performance Index.²⁰

Parent involvement

Parental involvement is key to student performance, but it is also important to improving school culture, working conditions, and overall student achievement. Beyond bake sales and PTA meetings, parents and community members need to do the difficult work of supporting schools and helping them achieve excellence. Districts should establish systems to integrate parents and community members into the decision-making process both at the district and school level. With this partnership approach, parents are not just welcome, but also essential partners in making schools work.

The Plattsburgh City School District in upstate New York established a District-Wide Educational Improvement Council, or DWEIC, that includes teachers, administrators, union officials, and parents as members. The DWEIC, which meets monthly, helps facilitate goal setting, planning, and shared decision making, and holds everyone accountable for implementation.

The district's students show high levels of proficiency in subject matter, and there is no significant difference in student performance on the basis of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Another positive outcome is a high level of community support for the district—bond votes and referenda requiring voter approval have never been rejected.²¹

Supportive workplaces

All too often new or struggling teachers feel isolated and stressed, without peers, prep time, or mentors. But the quality of both their work experience and their teaching can be improved through support, training, and resources. Collaboration with other teachers may be especially important to build teaching skills and confidence, as well as the ability to identify and solve problems. Examples from across the country suggest that improving the work environment for teachers can improve outcomes for schools.

Sanger Unified School District near Fresno, California, instituted “Professional Learning Communities” to build capacity at all levels of the district, including teachers, administrators, and central-office staff. These teams focus on improving student performance via collaboration, relationship building, professional development, data collection, and information sharing.²² Independent School District

With this partnership approach, parents are not just welcome, but also essential partners in making schools work.

15 in St. Francis, Minnesota, sets up site-based planning teams by school, department, and specialist groups that are led by teachers and meet weekly to cover student progress, curricula, and other issues.²³

Brooklyn Generation School is part of an effort to turn around South Shore High School in New York City. A smaller “school within a school,” it operates on the same per-pupil allocation as other New York City schools, but has a significantly different school day and year format, designed to focus on teacher collaboration. The instructional year is 200 days, and rather than having one long summer vacation, teachers have two month-long breaks a year, but work the same contractual hours as others in the district. The rearranged schedule required approval by the district and the United Federation of Teachers.

Teachers are organized into teams based on grade level and subject area and have two hours a day for planning, professional development, and discussion of student work. Teams are designed to promote peer learning and contain teachers with different levels of experience, skill, and content knowledge.

So far, it’s working. While only 20 percent of entering ninth graders were working at grade level, almost 80 percent are on track to graduate on time and are college ready.²⁴

Career pathways for teachers

Unlike many professional careers, teaching has a fairly truncated career path. The most common move up for a teacher is to move out of the profession and into school administration. Reimagining the job and finding alternate ways into it and up through advanced skills is a strategy to help bring greater training into the field and to reward those who pursue training and demonstrate skills in teaching. This helps motivate teachers to pursue training and also allows a means of rewarding and retaining them.

Cincinnati Public Schools and the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers developed the Career in Teaching program, a career ladder that includes five stages. In the early stages, teachers receive mentoring, and each successive level includes both more responsibility and more compensation.²⁵

Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland worked with the Montgomery County Education Association to adopt the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards,²⁶ or NBPTS, certification as the core of the district’s profes-

sional-growth system. NBPTS is an independent, rigorous, voluntary teacher-certification process. Teachers who choose to pursue certification receive coaching and support from staff-development teachers that are located at every school, two districtwide NBPTS instructional specialists, and a union staff member who coordinates logistics. In addition, they can get two days of release time to prepare, and the cost of taking the certification test is covered by the state and district. If they are successful, they receive \$4,000 more a year in salary. As a result, the district has one of the highest percentages of certified teachers in the country.²⁷

Boston Public Schools developed the Boston Teacher Residency, or BTR, which recruits individuals interested in a career in teaching and puts them through a master's-level training program based on the medical residency model. Students are placed as “residents” in a classroom for a year with a mentor teacher. Once they complete the program, the school system will forgive the cost of the program if the new teacher stays in the district for at least three years, during which time the program offers continued support. Eighty percent of BTR graduates stay in the district longer than three years.²⁸

In 2000, Education Minnesota St. Francis—the Independent School District 15 American Federation of Teachers affiliate—created the Teacher Academy, a professional-development program funded by state dollars. Focused on teacher quality, the academy is run collaboratively by the union, administration, and school board, and offers 12-year-long courses led by teachers.

In 2005, in response to state incentive funding, the parties created the Student Performance Improvement Program, which integrates the professional development of the academy with an evaluation and peer-review system, mentoring for teachers, and an alternative compensation system based on a career ladder. The program compensates teachers for developing their teaching skills, meeting student-achievement goals, and assuming leadership roles. The career ladder involves three years of mentoring for new teachers and evaluations by peers and administrators.²⁹

School turnaround

Communities need strategies to turn around their struggling schools. Successful school-turnaround strategies require strong partnerships and trust among administrators, teachers, and parents. The teams that emerge can then take on issues at the school level and focus increasingly on student success there.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District in North Carolina started the Strategic Staffing Initiative in 2007. Focused mostly on low-performing elementary schools, the initiative deploys teams of highly skilled principals and teachers, gives them additional resources, and allows flexibility in several instructional areas. The teams commit to the school for at least three years, and principals are allowed substantial leeway to develop their own plans for improving the school. The initial implementation suggests that a collaborative approach that builds trust between teachers and the school community is one key to success. One problem faced by the initiative is the lack of sufficient exemplary principals to implement the program in all the schools that need it.³⁰

The Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools in Tennessee implemented “MNPS Achieves” in 2009. The reform effort is based on 10 Transformational Leadership Groups that cover a range of areas, including support for disadvantaged youth, human capital, English-language learners, and more. These teams are made up of administrators, principals, teachers, parents, and community leaders. They are tasked with reviewing data and best practices, and developing proposals in their assigned area. There is a specific emphasis on increasing student and teacher performance, using distributed leadership, and encouraging collaboration with the community.

So far, teams have designed and implemented reforms to professional development, teacher orientation, programming for special-needs students, and graduation criteria. The district is also reorganizing central-office staff to be more school-oriented.³¹

City-school partnerships

Background

Schools are an incredible community resource but can become even more valuable if their use extends beyond the traditional bell schedule. Increasing learning time both by extending the school day and/or year and offering summer and after-school programming can help eliminate achievement gaps. What’s more, parental participation, enrichment opportunities, attendance, and test scores can all be enhanced with more learning time in and outside of school. And investment in out-of-school programs for youth can help reduce the community’s costs of juvenile justice systems.

Cities should:

Schools are an incredible community resource but can become even more valuable if their use extends beyond the traditional bell schedule.

- **Partner with school districts to support and fund a redesigned and expanded school day or year, as well as summer and after-school programming.** They should work together to coordinate easy access and transportation to programs.
- **Support programs that get chronically absent students back into school.** In particular, cities must ensure that truancy reduction is not contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline by criminalizing truancy and burdening young people with a criminal record so early in life.
- **Ensure that students get to school safely and efficiently.** Work with schools to plan and build safe, walkable, and bikeable routes to school, and to ensure that transit systems serve the needs of students.
- **Implement programs to reduce hunger and to provide a healthy food environment in and around schools, including getting every deserving child access to all benefits available under the National School Lunch Program.**
- **Partner with school districts to allow school buildings to serve community and civic purposes, such as polling, community meetings, disseminating information from city agencies, neighborhood centers, or delivery points for social work or public health services.**

By partnering with schools, city agencies can help them achieve their equalizing potential. The partnerships described in this section extend schools beyond their traditional role as places where students go in the morning, attend classes, and leave when the final bell rings. The partnerships illustrate the fact that the value of schools—for families, students, and entire communities—reaches far beyond the classroom.

Partnering to create programming beyond the school day

Cities can help support summer and after-school programming by partnering with school districts. Often, the role of a city is mostly of a funder of programing. But providing funding allows cities to set standards on program delivery and require coordination with the schools.

Both summer and after-school programming should provide a mix of activities such as homework clubs, sports, and academic support. The programs support learning and provide a positive way to spend time, as well as a way for kids to stay out of trouble. In the summer they help to counteract “learning loss,” the loss of knowledge through lack of use over a period of time. Learning loss is more prevalent in low-income youth and youth of color.

Polling conducted by the Afterschool Alliance found widespread public support for such programs: 76 percent of voters feel that after-school programming is a necessity for their communities.³²

For both summer and after-school programming, a central question is where to locate the activities. Though offering programs in school is ideal, community and neighborhood centers are also a good option. Either way, cities and school districts should work together to coordinate easy access and transportation (discussed more below).

Many successful programs incorporate city-school partnerships to extend educational programming. The Schools Uniting Neighborhoods, or SUN, partnership brings together agencies from Portland, Oregon (including the mayor's office, the parks district, and the Children's Levy,³³ a referendum-created city program to invest property-tax revenue in a variety of child-safety and education initiatives), Multnomah County, several school districts, and many nonprofits. It has created a wide range of summer and after-school programs, both in and out of schools.³⁴ And it's working. A study by Harvard researchers reported that 70 percent of SUN students are reaching or exceeding benchmarks in reading and math. Average daily school attendance is 95 percent, and 93 percent of students report having at least one adult who cares about them or to whom they can go for help.³⁵ The study cited the importance of a coordinating council to the success of this complex partnership.

Providence After School Alliance in Rhode Island is a public-private partnership between Providence, the Providence Public School District, and many nonprofits and community organizations.³⁶ Outcomes include the AfterZone (providing summer and after-school programs for middle schoolers) and The Hub (a set of student-driven extended-learning opportunities for high schoolers).

Another example is the Beacon Program in New York City. The NYC Department of Youth and Community Development partnered with community organizations and the city Department of Education to set up 80 Beacon centers throughout the city. Beacons, which operate in the afternoons, evenings, weekends, and during holidays and the summer, are "school-based community centers serving children, youth, and adults."³⁷

Partnering to reduce truancy and chronic absenteeism

City-school partnerships can be especially effective in reducing truancy and chronic absenteeism. In New York City, the Mayor's Interagency Task Force on

Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism and School Engagement found that three out of four students who are chronically absent in sixth grade never graduate from high school.³⁸ Not surprisingly, the cost is not only in lost human capital; chronically absent kids also burden the criminal justice system. The same task force found that 79 percent of New York City children in the juvenile justice system had records of chronic absenteeism.³⁹

Cities can start by ensuring that they are avoiding truancy-reduction practices that, in fact, connect truant kids more directly to prison than to schools. In Los Angeles, school police officials once treated truancy as a criminal matter by ticketing students who were not in school. But extensive research and campaigning by community and civil rights organizations highlighted how this policy actually undermined student engagement, while placing disparate impacts on students of color.⁴⁰ This led to a recent partnership among the city, police, and school officials to stop issuing citations to truant students and instead refer them to city youth centers.⁴¹

Other cities are also engaging in new partnerships to address truancy and absenteeism. The New York City Mayor's Interagency Task Force brings together multiple city agencies, schools, nonprofits, firms, and celebrities for initiatives ranging from a mentorship program to wake-up calls, data systems, and early warning systems.⁴²

The Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign was designed by a city-convened working group, including officials from city and state agencies, as well as parents, students, universities, foundations, nonprofits, and schools. The working group provided recommendations that led to multiple initiatives, including revisions to the city schools' code of conduct, data sharing, an attendance campaign, and improvements to public transit (see below).⁴³

More information on these and other programs are available in reports by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, the National Truancy Prevention Association, and the National Center for School Engagement.⁴⁴

Partnering for transportation to school

Cities and schools are also working together to ensure that students get to school safely and efficiently. These partnerships fall into two main categories. First, cities and schools are planning and building safe, walkable, and bikeable routes to school. Second, they are working to ensure that transit systems serve the needs of students.⁴⁵

As advocacy groups such as the Safe Routes to School National Partnership, or SRSNP,⁴⁶ and the National Center for Safe Routes to School, or NCSRS,⁴⁷ make clear, the basics of getting kids to school and back home safely aren't complicated: adequate signage, well-painted crosswalks, and crossing guards; good bicycle and pedestrian master plans; and pedestrian and bicycle-safety education in schools. Many of these are relatively low cost as well.

In Portland, Oregon, the city council tasked a stakeholder group—composed of city staff, police, school-district administrators, bike and pedestrian advocates, insurance agencies, and neighborhood associations—with developing a traffic-safety strategy and master plan. Together, the task force and the city were able to get state-level support to pass a surcharge on moving violations, which doubled the funds the city had available for traffic enforcement, traffic engineering, and traffic-safety education.

This and many more policy ideas and case studies are available in the SRSNP's "Safe Routes to School Local Policy Guide"⁴⁸ and the NCSRS program-tools database.⁴⁹

For mass transit, solutions can be somewhat more complicated, but also more comprehensive. The Center for Cities & Schools, a source for good ideas on all of these topics, has produced a study of how transit-oriented development (also covered in the section on infrastructure) has helped link schools and communities in the Bay Area of California.⁵⁰ And in Baltimore, the city's transit agency has worked with the Central Maryland Transportation Alliance and other advocacy organizations to launch a "Rate Your Ride" texting campaign. Rate Your Ride allows the agency to track real-time data about students' experiences, and then address issues that could impede their ability to get to school on time.⁵¹

Partnering to ensure quality nutrition for students

For optimal learning, students should eat enough healthy food. Studies have shown that even marginal food insecurity hurts student performance.⁵² Around the country, cities and schools have been working together to ensure that students are ready to learn, both through programs to reduce hunger and to provide a healthy food environment in and around schools.

One important step in making sure that students are not going hungry involves getting every deserving child access to all benefits available under the National

School Lunch Program. A recent report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has summarized how school districts and states can do this.⁵³ From Oakland⁵⁴ and San Diego⁵⁵ to Seattle⁵⁶ and Rochester, New York,⁵⁷ cities and schools are partnering to get free and nutritious meals to students during the summer, often with assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Summer Food Service Program.⁵⁸

Cities are also joining with school districts and community partners to improve the quality and nutritional benefits of the food offered at schools. Project Cool School Food, for example, has created partnerships between schools, local businesses, and nonprofits to develop, test, and implement plant-based recipes in school cafeterias.⁵⁹ In the Los Angeles County community of Baldwin Park, city and school officials partnered to create Healthy Baldwin Park.⁶⁰ This partnership has produced a number of policies that aim to create a healthier food environment for children, beginning with the passage in 2003 of the city's Healthy Policy Yields Healthy Minds resolution, which mandated that school vending machines transition to offering healthier options.⁶¹

Partnering to create multifunctional schools

School buildings can serve community and civic purposes beyond the daytime use of teaching students. In many cities, schools are used regularly as polling places or for community meetings. Cities and schools also work together to have schools serve as sites for disseminating information from city agencies, and as delivery points for social work or public health services.

The nature of a partnership to create multifunctional schools often varies from city to city. But some partnerships, such as the joint use of a school's indoor or outdoor recreational facilities, have similar characteristics. Working from the principle that opening these facilities to the broader community can reduce obesity and improve public health, the National Policy & Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity has created a number of model joint-use agreements, which city and school officials can easily adapt to fit the needs of their communities.⁶² KaBOOM!, a national nonprofit aimed at helping communities by building great play spaces and playgrounds, also has developed case studies of successful joint-use programs in cities such as Niagara Falls, New York, and Tucson, Arizona. It offers modest grants of \$15,000 to \$30,000 to spur partnerships between cities and school districts that open playgrounds beyond the school day.⁶³

Finally, the Center for Cities & Schools has produced a very helpful report that categorizes the various types of joint-use agreements in California school districts.⁶⁴ The study's key findings focus on ways in which formal policies and agreements between partners can increase the likelihood of success for joint-use partnerships. These agreements have supported the development of a wide range of projects, from shared indoor recreational facilities in West Sacramento and shared libraries in Orange County to a shared performing-arts center in San Diego and neighborhood redevelopment in Richmond.

Disconnected youth

Background

Too many youth ages 16 to 24 lack connection to employment or education. These “disconnected” youth have suffered in the aftermath of the Great Recession, as employment opportunities evaporated and have been so slow to return. Not surprisingly, the disconnected-youth group mirrors the inequality of opportunity that pervades society, with the disconnection rate of Black and Latino youth far surpassing the national average. This disparity is especially prevalent in youth exiting the educational system: Roughly a third of all young people leave school before completing high school, yet in communities of color, this rate jumps to almost one-half of youth.⁶⁵

The case for investment in this population is clear. For youth, disconnection at this critical stage has lifelong negative consequences economically (poverty, lower skill levels, and adult unemployment) and socially (incarceration and isolation). For society, the impact is similarly grave, with higher costs for public services and assistance, increased crime, and a less-skilled, less-competitive labor force.⁶⁶ The White House Council for Community Solutions found that the potential direct and indirect costs of this population, which they call “opportunity youth,” were estimated at \$93 million in 2011.⁶⁷

Further, the Social Science Research Center found that disconnected American youth tend to come from disconnected families living in disconnected neighborhoods. Because children are likely to remain in the same social class as their parents, this cycle will continue.⁶⁸ The National League of Cities asserts that “By reconnecting these young people to education, job training, and other vital services, cities can build a stronger base for future economic growth while also making their communities safer and their neighborhoods stronger and more stable.”⁶⁹

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Local governments can direct attention, resources, and community innovation to help these youth achieve success in a number of ways:

- Provide the leadership and framework to establish local collaboration and accountability to the population.
- Support targeted investments to keep kids in school.
- Connect youth to education that has relevance for learning and earning.
- Support career academies to connect at-risk youth more quickly to college.

Establish local collaboration and accountability

Because of the fragmented nature of disconnectedness, collaboration across sectors and populations is critically important. Success in this area demands strong local leadership. The National League of Cities’ “Beyond City Limits” report underscores the need for collaboration and strong mayoral leadership:

The biggest challenge often lies in the fact that no one agency or public system can typically address the multiple obstacles facing disconnected youth. Collaboration between city, school, county, and state agencies is essential to ensure that young people are being connected to necessary opportunities and supports, rather than falling through the cracks. ... City leaders are well positioned to launch these collaborative efforts. Mayors in particular can play an important role in bringing together key stakeholders and developing a citywide strategy that responds to the diverse needs of disconnected youth.⁷⁰

The Nashville Child and Youth Master Plan Task Force is an excellent example of effective mayoral leadership building collaboration across agencies and sectors. In 2010 Mayor Karl Dean commissioned the city’s first Children and Youth Master Plan through a 50-member task force representing schools, nonprofits, local government, and the private sector. The goal was to establish a common vision and a plan to guide partners in helping all Nashville children succeed and be healthy.

The resulting plan, a comprehensive, far-reaching 14-outcome document, extends beyond how education happens in a classroom, focusing on the family, community, and societal factors that affect children. The Mayor’s Office of Children and Youth oversees the plan’s implementation and is accountable for ensuring and tracking progress. While disconnected youth are one of the myriad areas covered in the plan, the outcomes of the task-force work are aimed at advancing youth

well-being and success at all ages. Their focus is on prevention, building support for parents and families, and increasing use of existing services.⁷¹

Corpus Christi, Texas, provides a powerful model for sustained collaboration. The city, county, school district, United Way, and other local stakeholders established a long-term Comprehensive Strategy for Youth to reduce the number of youth offenders, enhance public safety, and promote healthy development. Notably, despite very limited paid staffing and frequent leadership changes across partner organizations, the “highly focused public-private coalition” has achieved not only longevity, but also impressive outcomes in decreased rates of teen pregnancy, incarceration, and dropouts.⁷²

Keys to program success include sustaining the energy and focus of partners through short-term initiatives, based frequently around the Parks and Recreation Department and using the collaborative strategic plan as the basis of all short-term projects. Another factor in achieving success has been connecting to the local public university, whose analysis and data informed planning efforts and helped secure more than \$14 million in state, federal, and private grants in the past four years.⁷³

Support targeted programs to keep kids in school

Perhaps the most effective strategy for keeping youth in school is building connections—relationships and a sense of community—to support them there. Local governments can play a key role in providing youth with the opportunity to access this necessary support, by funding targeted outreach, on-site support in schools, and mentoring programs.

While we typically think of youth dropping out of school, progressive advocates urge that we reframe this term to recognize and address the societal and systemic forces at play. The fact is, many students are pushed out of schools because they are considered difficult, failing, or dangerous, often because of subtle racial biases; others face challenging life events, such as having a child or a death in the family, which make a standard school day impossible to maintain.⁷⁴

Disconnectedness cannot be solved until we shift blame from the “dropouts” and instead focus on building the opportunities and support systems needed for them to succeed in our educational system. Cities should promote targeted educational opportunities that meet the needs of this disconnected population, which many schools fail to address.⁷⁵

The successful Wyman Teen Outreach and Teen Leadership Programs, based in St. Louis, use an outreach strategy and curriculum to build relationships and support for youth at risk of leaving school. Wyman's programs include guided group discussions, service learning, and engaging youth in leadership roles, with the overall goals of building health behaviors, life skills, and a sense of purpose among participants. Studies of the program found significant reductions in teen pregnancy, course failure, suspension from school, and dropout among participants.⁷⁶

The program is innovative in its grounding in the theory of developmental, social, and educational needs of youth. It is also a cost-effective intervention, largely because it is held during the school day, resulting in a lower cost structure.⁷⁷ It has been replicated across the country, and administered by school districts, local governments, and nonprofits. Notably, program participants say that what they most needed to succeed in school was not new computers or books, but support and stronger relationships.

The model Colorado Youth for a Change, or CYC, program uses systematic outreach to identify students statewide that have withdrawn from schools, as well as those who have failed a course early in high school. CYC then responds to these students with direct services, including thorough assessments, help eliminating barriers to returning to school, determining the best school fit, and enrollment.

CYC also helps build capacity within schools and helps define curricula for schools targeting returning students. One such partnership is the Futures Academy in Aurora, Colorado, where 17- to 21-year-old students graduate with some combination of a GED, associate's degree, and technical certificates in 50 different areas.

Ensure that programs advance education while building skills for employment

Efforts to re-engage older disconnected youth in education are incomplete without helping them build skills for employment; programs focusing on employment without specific educational-advancement opportunities are similarly lacking.

Half of disconnected youth report a jobs-skills mismatch, in both a lack of work experience and in education, as their primary obstacle to returning to work. Many cities have had notable success in supporting programs that build employment skills and educational retention among disconnected youth, focusing particularly on older youth who left school several years earlier.

The Philadelphia Youth Network, or PYN, effectively balances exposure to career opportunities and on-the-job training with intensive educational support. The PYN has its roots in the job-training system, unlike many other programs that begin as correctional initiatives that tailor services to court-involved youth.⁷⁸

The PYN WorkReady initiative has deep, longstanding connections in the employer community, and now places more than 11,000 youth at 150 different employers annually. Work placements are offered throughout the year; fall and spring internship opportunities are structured around the school day and build on classroom education.

In Baltimore, decades of efforts by the Mayor's Office of Employment Development were unable to reduce the 50 percent dropout rate. Yet this turned around, in part, when an infusion of funding from the federal Workforce Investment Act and the Youth Opportunity Grants helped establish the Youth Council.⁷⁹ The council sets the vision for youth in the community, selects providers, and tracks their performance. Among the successful programs funded are one-stop job centers, the civic works urban service corps, a summer jobs program, and a career academy—all of which have educational opportunities co-located at employment and training sites. Baltimore's graduation rates have continued to increase each year, with particularly impressive gains among African American males.⁸⁰

And finally, the nationally recognized YouthBuild program provides transferable employment skills to high school dropouts, while continuing to support participants' educational development. Students alternate weeks of school in small classes with weeks of job training in construction skills.

The YouthBuild model also includes a strong connection to the community through the building and provision of affordable housing for homeless and low-income community members. This benefits not only the recipients of housing, but also builds invaluable, lifelong community leadership skills for participants. Since 1994, 100,000 program participants have constructed more than 20,000 units of housing on 200 local program sites.

Other key aspects of the program include youth leadership, where program participants share in the governance of the program; peer groups; counseling; life-planning skills; and an alumni program for graduates to continue participating and serve as mentors.

While a controlled experiment measuring this program's long-term impact is currently underway, decades of outcome data show significant improvement in participants' lives immediately following program completion; participants are more likely to complete their GED and hold steady employment, and less likely to engage in negative behavior such as drug use and violence.⁸¹

Career academies to support the transition to college for at-risk youth

Career academies were developed a generation ago to develop smaller learning communities with a stronger focus on the transition to work and learning after high school. More than 8,000 high schools in the United States now have such academies, which were evaluated in a rigorous random-assignment evaluation by MDRC.⁸² Their study, which traced students for more than a decade, found strong and sustained effects on students' labor-market outcomes—"most notably earnings, especially for African-American males"—without detrimental effects on educational outcomes. These are important findings that show it is possible to improve labor-market preparation and transitions to work without compromising academic goals and preparation for college.

Career academies operate within schools and typically host around 50 students per grade. They are generally organized around occupations and industry themes such as health sciences, law, business and finance, and pre-engineering. Students in an academy generally move as a cohort, taking classes with the same group of teachers over time and using curricula that mix academic and career-oriented courses.

A key aspect of the academy experience is work-based learning, including internships, which have become harder to fund since the end of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act. The MDRC evaluation suggests that these experiences likely played an important role in the positive results, so identifying community partnerships to support these activities may provide an important role for city and civic leadership.

Philadelphia Academies, Inc., or PAI, was formed to strengthen the connection between the business community and the school district, and support the city's 29 career academies. The partnership engages parents, labor, and the city's higher-education systems to increase graduation and transition-to-college rates. The partnership also builds shared infrastructure for industry engagement and business leadership on issues of skill development and school policy.

In addition, the PAI supports CEO Ambassadors for 21st Century Skills, which is an ad-hoc committee of executive leaders who annually set an agenda for stronger work-based curricula, mentoring, and career experiences for students.⁸³

This model's success is also evident in a strong partnership in St. Augustine, Florida, where students at Pedro Menendez High School participate in a medical and health career academy that connects them directly to the local hospital. And in Sacramento, California, the school district developed academies at all six of the city's high schools, resulting in significant improvement in student performance.⁸⁴

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