



## Forum Brief: Building a Comprehensive System to Support All Students Getting to High School Graduation and Beyond

April 27, 2012

### Overview

In 2010, President Obama challenged the nation to raise the college graduation rate to 60 percent by 2020, a goal that would require adding at least 8 million new graduates over the next 10 years. To meet this goal, the United States must redouble its efforts to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared for secondary learning and careers. Such efforts require that states and districts create a portfolio of options and supports that enable all students, including those at risk of dropping out or those who have already left school, to graduate from high school and advance to college.

Currently, the United States ranks 12<sup>th</sup> among 36 developed nations in the number of 25- to 34-years-olds with college degrees. It used to lead the world in this area. According to the Center for Labor Market Statistics at Northeastern University, 6.2 million youth aged 16-24 have dropped out of school. The White House Office of Community Solutions reports that these disconnected youth cost the nation \$252 billion in 2011, which included lost earnings as well as costs associated with youth crime.

This forum addressed how federal, state, and local policies can support efforts to prepare diverse learners for success. AYPF Senior Program Associate Andrea Browning introduced the forum speakers and provided a framework for the discussion. She noted that this forum specifically addressed the needs of disadvantaged youth, including the student population most at-risk of dropping out of school. Dropouts, or disengaged students, often require different approaches or pathways, as well as wrap-around supports, to re-engage them academically and with regard to a career path. The forum speakers, who provided national, state and local perspectives, included:

- Kathryn Young, Director of National Education Policy, Jobs for the Future;
- Vanda Belusic-Vollor, Executive Director, New York City Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Readiness; and
- Marissa Cole, Deputy Chief of Staff, Massachusetts Executive Office of Education.

### Presentations

Kathryn Young, Director of National Education Policy, Jobs for the Future (JFF), began the discussion by providing a national overview of data related to earning potentials, achievement

gaps, and demographic patterns in student poverty. She explained that JFF focuses on pathways for low-income and at-risk youth and adults to obtain postsecondary credentials with value in the labor market. Though a national organization, JFF works with partners on the ground to develop, implement, and improve innovative practices around the country, while also promoting policies to help scale what works. College readiness, persistence, and completion help determine how well the United States can compete in a global economy. Young explained that although the data could spell out a "doom and gloom" story, she suggested that there are a lot of positive trends in the data and in effective strategies for these youth as well. "By improving high school and college completion rates, we have the opportunity to improve the trajectory of our country," she said.

According to data presented by Young, postsecondary credentials are essential for workers to access family-sustaining wages and to help them avoid unemployment in today's economy. For example, workers with less than a high school diploma earned \$454 per week in 2009 and faced an unemployment rate of 14.6%, while workers with an associate's degree earned on average \$761 per week and faced an unemployment rate of 6.8%. Young also emphasized that the economy has seen a dramatic growth in "middle-skill" jobs and that employers have an urgent need for these skilled workers. She summarized, "The bad news is that those who have dropped out of school are finding it more difficult to find a job. The good news is that workers don't all need a master's degree to earn a good living."

Young also presented data on achievement gaps, which are much greater among low-income students. For example, of the nation's one million low-income students, about one-half leave high school without a diploma each year. Of these dropouts, only about 45% earn a diploma or GED through various "second chance" systems, and a very small percentage (about 3%) eventually earn a postsecondary degree with labor market value. These data, coupled with statistics showing that low-income and minority youths comprise at least 50% of the population in many states, show an urgent need to ensure the success of these students in our school system. "Minority students are now the majority of student populations in many states," noted Young.

Young said the good news is that policy organizations like JFF now have a great deal more information about strategies that are working in the field for these populations. She pointed to the New York City Department of Education, where leaders have been able to segment data to identify and target students at risk of dropping out, as well as identify those who already have left school. Young also explained that JFF helps local partners implement and monitor pathways to reengage off track and out of school youth students. According to Young, "These are relatively new data, and this is relatively new work. So, it's very exciting. We now know a lot more about these students. But we also know that one size does not fit all. We need multiple pathways to reach and serve these students."

Young then described a few commonalities among successful college readiness programs and highlighted two models that JFF is tracking closely. The common features of successful programs include:

- Setting a college-going culture. This expectation permeates the school or program;
- Acceleration, not remediation. Programs use time wisely so that students are taking rigorous courses and earning college credit sooner than later;
- Behaviors and dispositions. Programs help students develop habits of mind and resilience that will enable them to navigate high school and college successfully; and
- Push and support to succeed. Programs challenge students to reach important milestones, and support students and families through these goals.

The two models that are a part of JFF's work are: Early College High Schools and Back on Track Through Postsecondary Designs. Early College High Schools blend high school and college courses so that low-income youth and those underrepresented in higher education have the opportunity to earn a high school diploma and earn postsecondary credits at the same time. A key feature of these programs is that participating students may earn up to two years of transferable credits (the equivalent of an associate's degree) at no cost to the student. Young explained that Early College Designs scale this approach across school districts.

The Back on Track Through Postsecondary model reaches students who have gotten off track (two or more years over-age or under-credited) or are out of school. Typically in alternative educational settings, such programs seek to reengage youth by creating clear, supported pathways into and through postsecondary education. The model is implemented over three phases: enriched preparation, postsecondary bridging, and first year supports. At each phase, explained Young, students receive the necessary supports—both academic and otherwise—to help students balance work, school and family responsibilities; make transitions between institutions; and persist and complete their credential.

Young reported that the data regarding these models are very promising. For example, the graduation rate for early college high schools in 2010-11 was 93%, compared to 76% in their peer school districts, with all graduates earning at least some college credits. However, she added that successful programs are in pockets around the nation and that these models do not exist in every state or school district. "Although the implementation of early college and back on track models requires political will and financial support, it also requires federal and state policies that facilitate innovation and scaling what works," concluded Young.

Vanda Belusic-Vollor, Executive Director of New York City Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Readiness, continued the discussion by highlighting the multiple pathways portfolio and other initiatives of the Office of Postsecondary Readiness. Her office seeks to ensure that all students, but particularly those who are over-age and under-credited, graduate

from high school and successfully pursue a postsecondary pathway that meets their interests and needs.

Belusic-Vollor described the creation of the Office of Postsecondary Readiness in New York City, including its evolution from the historic Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, and its mission to serve differentiated segments of the city's over-age, under-credited student population. These students are defined as being at least two years off track relative to expected age and credit accumulation toward earning a diploma. Although the school district had enjoyed a significant increase in graduation rates under the chancellorship of Joel Klein, the numbers were not demonstrating that students were necessarily prepared for postsecondary success. "That's a different problem," said Belusic-Vollor.

Belusic-Vollor noted that her office, thanks to a grant from the Gates Foundation, conducted a major segmentation study that identified the specific needs of the city's at-risk population and led to the development of an "invest and invent" strategy for the three pathway models that exist in New York. Collectively, these models provide multiple career pathways for the target student population. The city's Multiple Pathways schools and programs include (with current site totals):

- Transfer Schools (49 schools), a highly successful model for younger and low-credited students;
- GED Programs (100+ programs), which have historically served the oldest and least-credited students; and
- Young Adult Borough Centers (22 programs), which serve the oldest and most-credited students.

Belusic-Vollor emphasized the valuable role of community partners in providing wrap-around services to students. For example, the Learning to Work program engages students through workforce connections, academic support, and other services provided across Multiple Pathways schools and programs through partnerships with community-based organizations. Community partners are tapped for their particular area of expertise, ranging from youth development to specific industries.

Belusic-Vollor reported that systemic DOE reforms have substantially reduced the size of the over-age, under-credited population, resulting in higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates city-wide since 2005. However, she also noted that while progress is incremental, the evaluation of Multiple Pathways programs requires differentiated accountability structures that align with the unique missions of the alternative models. For example, these programs should not be compared to four-year comprehensive schools; instead, her office uses six-year graduation rates to measure programs' success. As she explained, "We want to be held accountable for what matters. We use a value added metric that aligns with our portfolio. That way, we can compare our schools and programs using relevant data."

Belusic-Vollor concluded her presentation by describing the challenges of constantly investing in and improving existing models. She said that Transfer Schools, when their success is measured appropriately, deliver the most value-added performance for the most challenged students. New York City, Belusic-Vollor explained, has developed an accountability structure that supports the mission of Transfer Schools. The challenges for improvement, however, are determining how to fund these schools more deeply; how to provide greater incentives to serve the most challenged population; and how to maximize resource allocation by aligning funding to enrollment patterns. "Our theory of action is driven by the populations we serve. We are using our innovations to drive policy," she explained.

Marissa Cole, Deputy Chief of Staff at the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, was the next presenter at the forum and offered a state perspective on the issues. She highlighted a number of statewide efforts focused on at-risk youth, including Massachusetts's Early Warning Indicator System, which identifies students from kindergarten through high school who are at-risk of falling behind academically; the School-to-Career Connecting Activities program, which provides experiential and work-based learning opportunities for youth and YouthWorks, which provides subsidized summer jobs for youth in 25 communities with greatest incidence of juvenile detention and adjudication and a significant population of low-income youth. As Cole explained, "I'm not here because Massachusetts has it all figured out. I am here because we believe that this is a critically important conversation. In Massachusetts, we have supported new efforts at the local level to foster the development of new pathways and to reflect our belief that schools can't do it alone and that a student's zip code shouldn't determine his/her educational outcome."

Cole gave a brief overview of the many programs and priorities established by Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick and Secretary of Education Paul Reville. She described a "culture shift" that has brought various stakeholders to the table and has resulted in better coordinated policies and programs. Cole explained that the state's thinking has evolved from a focus on dropout prevention to one on dropout prevention and re-engagement, similar to the shift that Belusic-Vollor described in New York City. She also noted that while the state is still working to define career readiness, it recognizes that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient for meeting all students' needs.

The Executive Office of Education's role is to integrate the work of the Departments of Early Education and Care, Elementary and Secondary Education, and Higher Education to support the overarching goal of integrating a PK-20 system. Cole explained that two cross-secretariat positions have recently been formed to enable work to take place across various sectors, including housing and economic development, labor and workforce development and health and human services.

Echoing the sentiments of Belusic-Vollor, Cole said that the inclusion of community partners was critical for changing the conversation about college and career readiness. She pointed to the work of the Boston Private Industry Council, Boston's workforce investment board, which she

said has been a leader in this area and a consistent, strong voice in Boston and in state discussions, and to a comprehensive Pathways Center in Brockton, which offers a variety of programs to serve at-risk youth with the valuable support of community partners, including law enforcement, parent engagement programs, the YMCAs and others.

Pending state legislation would raise the compulsory school attendance age in Massachusetts, from 16 to 18, as well focus on reengaging youth. Cole recognized that forcing students to stay in their original schools is not a complete solution and that a variety of options, such as alternative education programs, Massachusetts's Innovation Schools and early college high schools as well as the state's vocational technical school districts, have been successful in inspiring students and helping them to re-engage and persist to a diploma.

In addition, Cole said that her state has taken advantage of several federal grant opportunities, including the Race to the Top funds, which spurred the creation of STEM Early College High Schools in Massachusetts, and the High School Graduation Initiative (HSGI). She also highlighted a few other grant initiatives as well as identified the challenges the state faces moving forward. These challenges include: a lack of capacity in alternative education settings; sustainability in the absence of grant funding; and thinking strategically about maximizing partnerships.

The forum discussion looped back to Young, who identified five federal policy priorities that would help states and districts scale up their effective programs. Some of these priorities are discussed in Young's paper for JFF, "Dropout Recovery is National Recovery: How Federal Policies Can Support the Spread of Back on Track through College Pathways." The priorities include:

- Setting a mutual expectation of postsecondary success
- Encouraging collective impact and strategic collaboration across sectors and institutions
- Encouraging activities that support students through transitions
- Supporting innovation and invention around new strategies
- Reducing barriers to collaboration and innovation

She cautioned that the indicators used in accountability systems and program evaluations can make a big difference in how a program is measured. The indicators should provide some credit for milestones towards postsecondary attainment and account for students' starting points, while still setting postsecondary credentials with value as the goal. Young also suggested that federal grant programs be better coordinated with one another to facilitate leveraging funds and better aligned with labor market data to ensure that the credentials students earn have labor market value.

## Question & Answer Period

Forum attendees had an opportunity to ask the presenters a few questions. The first question concerned the Multiple Pathways programs in New York City and what lessons the district has learned over time. Belusic-Vollor responded, saying that the district's Multiple Pathways portfolio is now encouraging staff at comprehensive schools to serve the over-age, under-credited populations within their own schools. "We're pushing staff to get these programs into large comprehensive schools. We want Transfer Schools to teach other schools how to do the work too," she explained.

Belusic-Vollor added that New York City is also trying to inspire leaders on the ground and figure out sound accountability structures for comprehensive schools. She noted that the academic frameworks that guide youth development are really the same frameworks that guide good teaching, and that this would be helpful for policy makers to recognize.

The next member of the audience asked the presenters what recommendations they have to encourage parents to value a college education. Belusic-Vollor explained that college and career readiness is different from vocational education. The former sets higher expectations for college readiness, though both aim to prepare students for the workforce. She stressed the importance of schools including entire families by, for instance, offering computer skills workshops and W-2 trainings.

The final question concerned ancillary support services to high schools and moving beyond the traditional "seat time" model of accountability. Cole suggested that Innovation Schools in Massachusetts, which allow for greater flexibility and autonomy than traditional public schools, can use the flexibility in the area of scheduling to provide dual enrollment and work-based learning experiences for at-risk youth. Belusic-Vollor and Young both agreed that models of blended learning—real life experiences combined with "seat time" learning—are popping up around the country and that flexibility in program implementation is key to these programs' success. "We are trying to get our state to work around seat time requirements. It's about what you can learn, and what you know," said Belusic-Vollor.