**American Youth Policy Forum**

April 4th, 2014

**Re-Engaging Dropouts: Local Innovations and New Opportunities for Federal Policy**

Overview

On April 4th the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) in conjunction with the National League of Cities (NLC) and Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) hosted a Capitol Hill forum examining local progress and federal policy connections that support systematic efforts to re-engage dropouts in education. Forum presents included:

* Andrew O. Moore, Senior Fellow, Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, National League of Cities
* Robert Sainz, Assistant General Manager, Economic and Workforce Development Department, City of Los Angeles
* Eric Dregne, Vice President of Strategic Initiatives, Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque

Closing remarks were provided by Allie Kimmel, Legislative Assistant to Representative Jared Polis of the Colorado second congressional district.

Jennifer Brown Lerner, Deputy Director at AYPF, opened the forum and introduced the presenters. Ms. Brown Lerner highlighted the importance of educational reengagement efforts as 1.8 million young people ages 16-21 are not in school[[1]](#footnote-1) and one in five students do not graduate from high school in the United States[[2]](#footnote-2). Thus, there is a growing need to improve reengagement strategies and student access to workforce training and education. In keeping with AYPF, YTFG and NLC’s commitment to providing opportunities for success among American youth, the work highlighted by the forum presenters represent various efforts to reengage high school dropouts in education.

Presentations

Andrew O. Moore, Senior Fellow, Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, National League of Cities offered an overview of dropout reengagement in cities. He identified four areas of focus for improving the dropout crisis: identifying chronic absence as a key precondition, developing early warning systems and interventions, pressing for ongoing high school reform so more students have the opportunity to graduate, and expanding alternative school models through opportunities such as dual enrollment. Focusing specifically on reengagement strategies, city and district must provide an open door approach, that creates opportunities for professionals to reach out to dropouts, asses their mental and educational needs both in and out of school environments, and support them through and beyond the reenrollment process. Coordination between school districts, NGOs, city governments and community colleges can provide these resources to dropouts. Engagement can take place online and in person, at schools and through deployed staffing models. Mr. Moore cited Washington State’s Open Doors Youth Engagement program and Colorado’s “Drop In” campaign as successful examples of youth reengagement efforts. Across US cities in the 2012-2013 school years Mr. Moore’s data indicated that initial outreach efforts connected with 41,000 students with 6,000 confirmed reenrollments. He also reported a 73 percent “stick rate” among students that have been reengaged. Mr. Moore concluded by emphasizing the importance of developing reengaging networks that connect with more youth and improve the “stick rate” of students who return to school or other educational opportunities.

Robert Sainz, Assistant General Manager, Economic and Workforce Development Department, City of Los Angeles began his presentation by emphasizing that reengagement is a national problem and the United States is falling further behind other countries in terms of dropout rates. In the City of Los Angeles, Mr. Sainz identified a key precursor for dropping out as a student missing ten days or more in a school year. In addition, dropout rates are highest for Hispanic/Latino and African American youths. However, Mr. Sainz emphasized, it is not a race issue; rather, it is a poverty issue as Los Angeles dropout rates are consistent with other comparable areas, regardless of the ethnicities of the population. Research commissioned by the city of Los Angeles indicated that 100,000 out of 500,000 youths between the ages of 16 and 24 are not in school and not working. It also indicated that the leakage starts early, happens quickly and gets worse.

To address the issue, the City of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Unified School District combined their efforts to develop a systems-based approach. Mr. Sainz emphasized the importance of system development at a local level in addressing dropout reengagement as opposed to the implementation of individual programs. Through the Workforce Innovation Fund and a continued and expanding partnership between the City and School District, reengagement centers have been placed in areas with the highest needs. The centers are staffed by counselors from the School District and run by community organizations that have already developed a relationship of trust with local populations. These partnerships allowed school data to be used in conjunction with local resources to target individual dropouts.

In 2012-2013, Mr. Sainz reported that 8,000 students walked through the doors of reengagement centers. Although they are currently in the process of assessment, Mr. Sainz indicated that a key element of the system’s success has been the variety of educational opportunities provided to students and that students are not forced to return to traditional schools in the LA Unified School District. The centers have also provided an opportunity to address the issue of truancy. Instead of students being ticketed and paying a fine, they are instead referred to reengagement centers which encourage students to return to school.

Mr. Sainz concluded by indicating the importance of engaging the leaders and the public in building a system that supports dropouts. As Mr. Sainz stated, “it is important to the Josés and Marías and the Johns and Marys of the world who often don’t have people advocating for them”.

Eric Dregne, Vice President of Strategic Initiatives, Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, opened his presentation by highlighting the City of Dubuque’s approach to reengaging dropouts through community partnerships among various organizations. Mr. Dregne agreed with Mr. Sainz in stating that a systems-based approach is very important in addressing reengagement. Mr. Dregne also indicated that the relationship between students and schools is crucial to student reengagement. Because of Dubuque’s small size, each individual dropout can be contacted and engaged with, establishing a positive relationship with each student.

Mr. Dregne identified that there are financial costs to students dropping out, including a community tax burden as well as missed earning potential for students. Thus, there is an economic reason to address the issue of students dropping out. In order to reengage students as future productive members of society, Dubuque indentified two questions to answer: why are students dropping out and what can be done about it?

Based on data collected from dropouts in Dubuque, Mr. Dregne indicated that most students left school for family reasons. Reengagement coaches connected with students and “made it okay” for students to have reasons to leave school in order to strengthen the rapport with dropouts. Reengagement coaches encouraged students to return to school and consulted with students at local community college campuses. Reengagement coaches reached out to students in the community and developed individual plans to return students to school. Mr. Dregne reported that over an 18-month period they had a “stick rate” of 87% with 180 students from the community returned to school. In addition, there has been a slight increase in graduation rates and lower dropout rates in Dubuque. Mr. Dregne did indicate that there are minimal alternative pathways for student to gain high school equivalency beyond the GED and suggested this is a policy opportunity to developing alternatives for high school accreditation.

Ms. Allie Kimmel concluded the presentations by discussing some efforts being undertaken at the federal level to reengage dropouts. Ms. Kimmel pointed to the efforts of Rep. Jared Polis to expand charter school networks in Colorado that serve predominantly drop-out populations. Ms. Kimmel indicated that there is recognition at the federal level for increased flexibility in the law so that students may pursue alternative pathways to high school equivalency education. Working with public charter school networks as an alternative to traditional public schools is one such way to flexibly engage dropouts.

Discussion/Questions and Answer

Following the presentations, various questions were posed to the presenters from the audience.

* Ms. Brown Lerner posed the first question to the entire panel which addressed the issue of system accountability and policy efforts to encourage alternative methods for reengaging dropouts. Mr. Sainz indicated that the goal is to return students to school so the “stick rate” is important. He also indicated that accountability is done in steps and rewards are in place for small accomplishments. There needs to be an understanding that the diploma isn’t the end point. Mr. Dregne stated that identifying milestones and rewarding for them as well as encouraging the development of an alternative credential to a high school diploma are important. Mr. Moore stated that eliminating disincentives such as graduation rates being tied to funding would be an important step and encouraging the award of nontraditional credentials.
* Questions were posed to Mr. Sainz and Mr. Dregne regarding the qualifications and background of the reengagement counselors and coaches in Los Angeles and Dubuque. Mr. Dregne reported that the two current reengagement coaches have diverse backgrounds but are passionate about their work and see a high school diploma as important means to an economic end. Mr. Sainz indicated that the counselors in Los Angeles are usually passionate social workers and the case workers have collegiate background and have been working in the field for a number of years.
* Mr. Sainz and Mr. Dregne were asked if a social-emotional learning assessment was included in the process to reengage students. Mr. Sainz stated that quite a number young people that have taken advantage of the resources in Los Angeles have experience emotional trauma but have a great resilience. He indicated that there is a goal to develop a mental healthcare center and component to their services and as of now there is not a significant social-emotional assessment of students taking place. Mr. Dregne echoed Mr. Sainz in stating that Dubuque reengagement coaches report a growing need to offer social-emotional support to students beyond the reengagement process.
* A question was posed to the panel regarding the use of mentoring programs in the reengagement process. Mr. Dregne stated that mentoring is being “casually piloted” in Dubuque but on a very small scale. They hope to expand their efforts in the future. Mr. Sainz indicated that their major focus is to help students gain social capital and place kids in opportunities to see the broader world. Thus, summer employment and mentoring-type programs are a component of reengagement. Mr. Moore said that there are currently no major efforts to include mentoring in reengagement programs but it certainly warrants further exploration.
* A question about the “supply side” of reengagement was posed to the panel, specifically regarding how welcoming particular educational environments are to students who return. Mr. Sainz stated that it is clear that reengaging dropouts is not incentivized to school districts and that there is a real “push out” factor within schools. In order to remedy this, Mr. Sainz suggested economically incentivizing schools, particularly charter schools and smaller education programs, to engage with dropouts. Mr. Sainz reported that reengaging students in nontraditional schools can have greater “sticking power”. Mr. Dregne added that a lack of alternative options for students is a major challenge and that taking a student-based approach to identify individual needs is necessary in order to make sure reengaged students feel comfortable.

Closing remarks were made by all panelists. Mr. Sainz pointed out that there is no one solution to the problem and that all stakeholders must work together to take a system-based approach. Mr. Dregne stated that there are a variety of different approaches to finding a solution that may work, as demonstrated by the success in both Los Angeles and Dubuque. Mr. Moore emphasized the importance of expanding research and developing partnerships to further reengagement efforts. Ms. Kimmel encouraged audience members to reach out to congressional staffers as well as community partners to engage with schools and foster more conversations on the importance of dropout reengagement.

1. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics (2013) *Public School Graduates and Dropouts from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2009-10;*<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013309.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Balfanz, R, Bridgeland, J, Bruce, M, & Fox, J.H. (2013).*Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic - 2013 Annual Update*. Washington, D.C.: America's Promise Alliance, Alliance for Excellent Education, Civic Enterprises, & Everyone Graduates Center. Retrieved from <http://www.civicenterprises.net/MediaLibrary/Docs/Building-A-Grad-Nation-Report-2013_Full_v1.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)