

**Memo On
Reconnecting Our Youth
From A Coalition Of Voices**

As President Bush begins his second term, he has indicated a strong interest in reforming the nation's secondary schools to ensure that every high school student graduates with proficiencies that will enable them to succeed. The undersigned organizations support the President's vision, and ask that he also commit to reforms that will improve the well-being of America's youth, in particular [those who are the most vulnerable](#) and disconnected.

This memo outlines a series of recommendations, many of which can be implemented within existing statutory and budget authority, to help the nation's most valuable resource—our youth—develop into successful, self-sufficient adults. Nevertheless, we also recognize that many of the federal programs that support the transition of disadvantaged youth to productive adulthood are inadequately funded, leaving many eligible and needy youth unable to access the services, education, and supports requisite to successful transition.

According to the [White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth](#) (April 2003), the National Academy of Sciences estimates that one-quarter of the adolescents in this country are at serious risk of not achieving productive adulthood. Nationally, [3 out of 10](#) (68%) young people who enter public high school do not graduate four years later. The graduation rate is only [50%](#) for Hispanic, African American, and Native American youth. This situation is especially devastating in the very poorest urban and rural communities where [only one-third graduate](#).

Far too many young people are in danger of being left behind. Many of these young people are already in the public's care—in the [foster care](#) and/or the [juvenile justice](#) systems.

Over time, secondary school reform and innovation should transform the landscape of education delivery. Until then, each year more than a half-million youth will leave school without a high school diploma, the necessary skills to compete in the labor market, or the community supports they need to constructively engage with mainstream America. They will join the approximately 3.8 million youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who have already dropped out and are faring poorly in the labor market and in their communities.

Contrary to public perception, most of these youth desperately want to be productive, and aspire to a better life.

As a country we have the knowledge and the technology to close the skills gap and racial disparities that have persisted for far too long. It takes political leadership, effective policies, and smart investments in our young people to harness their energy and empower them with the competencies to contribute to our economic engine.

Our country cannot afford to allow so many youth to linger outside the mainstream economy, without the skills and supports they need to succeed. Effective reform must include expanding the boundaries of the traditional education system to engage communities, parents, employers, and other sectors in developing

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effective pathways and supports to help students remain in school and, just as important, reconnect those who have dropped out but need a second chance.

The President has made clear his commitment to leave no child behind. As he turns his attention to our high schools, he can send a powerful message that he has high expectations for every student. He can command attention from all levels of government and from American families, faith- and community-based organizations, and employers to extend their stewardship to find effective community-based solutions to this most pressing problem.

Our coalition of organizations stands ready, willing, and able to work with the President to help all young people reach their full potential. We ask for the President's consideration and support for the following recommendations.

- Use the Presidential "bully pulpit" to set a national goal to **Reach Out and Reconnect** our youth
- Establish an interagency Federal Youth Development Council, as recommended by the White House Task Force Report for Disadvantaged Youth
- Improve youth services through better public accountability
- Establish flexibility in public education funds for disadvantaged youth, to enable enrollment in the most appropriate educational environments
- Use the reauthorization of key federal programs to strengthen supports for youth transitioning to adulthood.
- Expand opportunities for youth to engage in community service and work experience
- Provide incentives and technical support to increase employer participation in developing internships, pipelines and intermediaries

Use the presidential "bully pulpit" to establish a goal to **Reach Out and Reconnect** our youth

By setting goals for reforming the American high schools, President Bush can send a clear message that our nation is committed to providing opportunity and support for all young people who want to constructively engage in their communities, better their academic skills, and be part of a skilled workforce. The President can ask for the active participation of governors, municipal leaders, business leaders, community and faith-based-organizations, and citizens in making sure our high schools are equipped to serve struggling students and our communities stand ready to re-engage students who need another chance to get on track.

Establish a Federal Youth Development Council

The White House Task Force Report on Disadvantaged Youth found fragmentation among the various federal youth funding streams and in service delivery for disadvantaged youth. Lack of coordination among the Departments of Labor, Education, Health and Human Services and the Justice Department—all of which have programs and policies that serve disadvantaged youth—makes it difficult for state and local programs to blend funding streams and organize service delivery at the community level. There are built-in disincentives for local coordination in the regulations and policies set by the federal departments, and the

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work of sorting them out at the state and local level is difficult. A Federal Youth Development Council, that brings together the agency Secretaries, representatives from the youth services field, employers, representatives from local government, and youth can serve to:

- Keep attention focused on the issues of disadvantaged and disconnected youth, set national priorities, measure progress on key indicators, and make policy recommendations to the White House
- Establish specific task forces or advisory committees, which include meaningful youth representation, to focus on the most pressing issues (in particular, systemic issues and policies that contribute to disparate outcomes for youth in certain subgroups) and foster cross-sector participation in advancing solutions
- Facilitate ongoing federal inter-departmental collaboration and inter-agency responses to relax the federal bureaucracy and promote the flexibility needed for more responsive solutions
- Provide interagency support for state and local government efforts to assess youth-related policies, programs, funding streams, indicators, and data in order to create and implement strategic plans for coordinated investment of federal, state, and local dollars to improve outcomes for youth

[The Federal Youth Coordination Act \(H.R. 856/S. 409\)](#) was introduced in the 109th Congress by Rep. Tom Osborne (R-NE) and Sen. Norm Coleman (R-MN). Original co-sponsors include Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Mike DeWine (R-OH), and Representatives Harold Ford (D-TN), Pete Hoekstra (R-MI), and Donald Payne (D-NJ).

Improve youth services through better public accountability

Requiring high schools, foster care and juvenile justice agencies, and other federally funded agencies serving disadvantaged youth to publicly report their demographics, service levels, expenditures and outcomes would enable local communities to assess the magnitude of the problem, system performance and who is—and is not—effectively served, and monitor improvement over time. We recommend the following:

- [Develop a uniform definition for measuring graduation and drop-out rates](#) for local high schools, alternative schools, charter schools, school districts, and states. Establish accountability measures under the No Child Left Behind Act related to graduation rates and hold states and local systems accountable for making progress towards those benchmarks for all youth.
- Require states to monitor policies and practice that result in youth being “pushed out” or disproportionately tracked to inappropriate [educational alternatives](#)
- [Require HHS to implement the National Youth in Transition Data System](#) (the accountability system for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program as mandated by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999)
- Provide both incentives and sanctions to state and local [child welfare](#) and [juvenile justice](#) systems to ensure effective transitional services, including the requirement that at key risk points and before a youth is discharged, there are explicit transition plans to connect youth to key education, training, housing, and support services

- [Continue to support the Runaway, Homeless, and Missing Children Protection Act of 2003](#), including the provision requiring HHS to coordinate with the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness to develop a Report on Strategies to End Youth Homelessness.

Establish flexibility in federal public education funds for disadvantaged youth, to enable enrollment in the most appropriate education environments

High schools must be reconfigured to inspire and retain students, support those who are struggling, remove the barriers to re-enrollment for youth who have dropped out, and create non-traditional alternatives for youth who can benefit from and choose to enroll in smaller, more supportive environments. Students who drop out can often be re-engaged and better served in alternative settings, like community-based academic and experiential learning programs with a demonstrated ability to achieve high school certification for these youth. Introducing accountability and flexibility in financing alternative education opportunities for older youth can allow more communities to work with their local districts to develop alternate pathways to labor market success for out-of-school youth.

- Provide incentives and technical assistance to enable public education funds (federal, state, and local) to be directed to bona fide education programs operated by qualified community-based organizations, community colleges and other entities that are better suited to serve the complex education, training, and support needs of youth seeking to reattach at the secondary level
- Strengthen the capacity of the Department of Labor (in conjunction with the Department of Education) to focus on community-based alternative education strategies with special attention to effective instructional technologies, delivery methods, workforce connections, and performance accountability
- Invest in a knowledge development effort to identify the type of instructional technologies and interventions that work for youth with low literacy levels, and facilitate the expansion of such programs
- Synchronize the performance expectations for youth served by the adult education system and the Workforce Investment Act system to remove the disincentives to blending funding in the service of youth with extremely low literacy levels

Use the reauthorization process to strengthen systems to support youth, especially those at risk, in successfully transitioning to productive adulthood

There are many key federal programs that support the transition of youth to productive adulthood. The recommendations offered below would improve these programs, and better enable the productive engagement of our nation's youth and a skilled workforce for employers.

Higher Education Act. Strengthen the ability of the community college system to serve as a bridge for out-of-school youth seeking to gain marketable skills and academic skills for success in post-secondary education. There are promising community college-based models that allow drop-outs to accrue credits towards high school and post secondary credentialing, sometimes concurrently.

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- Strengthen the ability of the TRIO programs to provide college preparatory assistance to disadvantaged high school students and out-of-school youth enrolled in alternative community-based programs
- Open access to higher education funding for high school drop-outs who can demonstrate the ability to benefit from post-secondary education and training; expand the definition of “ability to benefit,” as proposed by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, to include individuals without a high school diploma who have successfully completed six units of college courses
- Adopt alternative measures for determining institutional eligibility for student aid that do not discourage the enrollment of disadvantaged or higher-risk youth, rather than relying solely on student loan default rates
- Increase the amount of the maximum Pell Grant and direct the Department of Education to maintain the current formula for calculating eligibility so that hundreds of thousands of low-income young people will not be denied access to a higher education

Workforce Investment Act (H.R. 27 & S. 9). Reauthorize the WIA youth title to serve as an effective transition support system for out-of-school and extremely vulnerable youth. The WIA youth title already requires the provision of case management and follow-up for enrolled youth. [Requiring an increased focus on youth who are out of school, homeless, or transitioning from foster care and the justice system](#) can provide the necessary community infrastructure to facilitate their transition. Several other adjustments must be made to accommodate the complex needs of these youth:

- Retain the requirement for Youth Councils under WIA and encourage and enable the participation of the education and child welfare systems, runaway and homeless youth grantees, and the justice system in structuring the transition supports for vulnerable youth.
- Adjust the factors of the funding formula to ensure that the resources target communities with the greatest level of youth distress and promote increased expenditures per youth to reflect the need for more comprehensive education, training, and transition support
- Implement policies that facilitate the sharing of information on individual youth to enable better case management and outcomes tracking across systems
- Build on the capacity developed in communities that were part of the Youth Opportunities and the Young Offender demonstrations; use discretionary funding to sustain efforts in communities where successful systems innovation has occurred, which can serve as learning laboratories for the rest of the system
- Recalibrate performance measures to take into account the increased risk factors so that they don't serve as a disincentive to engaging the youth with greatest needs

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (H.R. 1160 & S. 667). Reauthorization provides the opportunity to refocus policy related to youth in TANF households, young parents on TANF, and TANF's role in positive youth development. Specific recommendations include:

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- Make explicit to states that expenditures of TANF funds on programs that reconnect out-of-school youth to high quality education and training alternatives is in keeping with national priorities
- Encourage the connection of young parents to post-secondary vocational training and remove the disincentives inherent in the definitions of work activity and the start of the TANF time clock
- For youth in TANF households who are drop-outs or at imminent risk of dropping out, require that the Individual Responsibility Plans identify specific steps to reconnecting them to education and training support

Serious and Violent Offenders Reentry Initiative. The **Second Chance Act of 2005 (H.R. 1704)**, introduced in the 109th Congress, would reauthorize the Serious Violent and Offenders Reentry Initiative. We encourage the Administration to support the following provisions:

- Support the provision to reauthorize the juvenile offender reentry demonstration grant. With 100,000 youth exiting juvenile corrections facilities each year, it is critical to aid their successful reintegration into society through an array of services
- Support the provision that requires HHS to review the role of child protective services after arrest and establish services to preserve families
- Support the provisions authorizing mentoring grants to community-based organizations and the Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act (H.R. 366 & S. 250). In reauthorizing the Perkins Act, the Administration can urge Congress to maintain the federal commitment to strengthening secondary career and technical education opportunities. We recommend the following:

- Make career preparation and technical education available to all secondary school students, including those in alternative school environments
- Improve the integration of learning for academic excellence through the context of careers
- Expand strategies, such as work-based learning, experiential learning, internships, career exploration, etc. for youth going to postsecondary education or training or the workforce after high school
- Improve the rigor and quality of career and technical education by ensuring a link to academic standards
- Align career and technical education curriculum to post-secondary entrance requirements

Expand youth opportunities to engage in community service and work experience

Teen employment is at its lowest rate since 1948. Economically distressed communities face serious challenges in their ability to offer young people the opportunities for gainful employment or civic engagement that are key to preparing them for a productive adulthood. The [White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth](#) (October 2003) recommended a youth service initiative that would allow older youth to “display leadership by providing opportunities for them to serve children living in high poverty areas of the United States.” Such experiences enable youth to give back to their communities and develop civic pride and leadership skills. They also provide an avenue for communities to engage youth in the community building process. We applaud the Administration’s expansion of AmeriCorps (administered by the [Corporation for National and Community Service](#)), and ask that the Administration increase its efforts to identify and support programs through [AmeriCorps](#)—such as [Service and Conservation Corps](#) and [YouthBuild](#)—that enroll youth who are low-income and/or out of school. In addition, much can be achieved by focusing the investment in [Learn and Serve America](#) on successful and innovative programs and promoting systemic change that leads to the infusion of service-learning throughout our nation’s schools, colleges, and community-and faith-based organizations.

Provide incentives and technical support to increase employer participation in developing internships, pipelines and intermediaries

The high-paying jobs and careers of the future will require levels of education, skill, and technical competence that far exceed those typical of youth coming from distressed communities and school systems. These youth are the least likely to be exposed to exciting new career opportunities in science, medicine, the arts, and other professions. Expanding their horizons and aspirations can only be accomplished by engaging the corporate sector to help young people explore workplaces and understand the demands, rewards and prerequisites for entry. The Bush administration can assist in the following ways:

Encourage federal contractors operating in distressed communities to engage with local intermediaries in providing internships and learning opportunities for disadvantaged youth

Through grants and technical assistance, expand the capacity of local intermediaries to work with business, the community and school systems to create pipelines and work opportunities

Support training and technical assistance to expand employers’ capacity to better manage diversity, serve as mentors, and constructively engage in the process of preparing youth for success in the economy of the future

The President has the opportunity to fulfill America’s promise to the millions of youth who, with additional support, can make a significant contribution to our economic and social well-being. The undersigned organizations look forward to working with this Administration using our collective ability to Reach out and Reconnect our youth to a vibrant future of physical, emotional, and economic well-being.

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