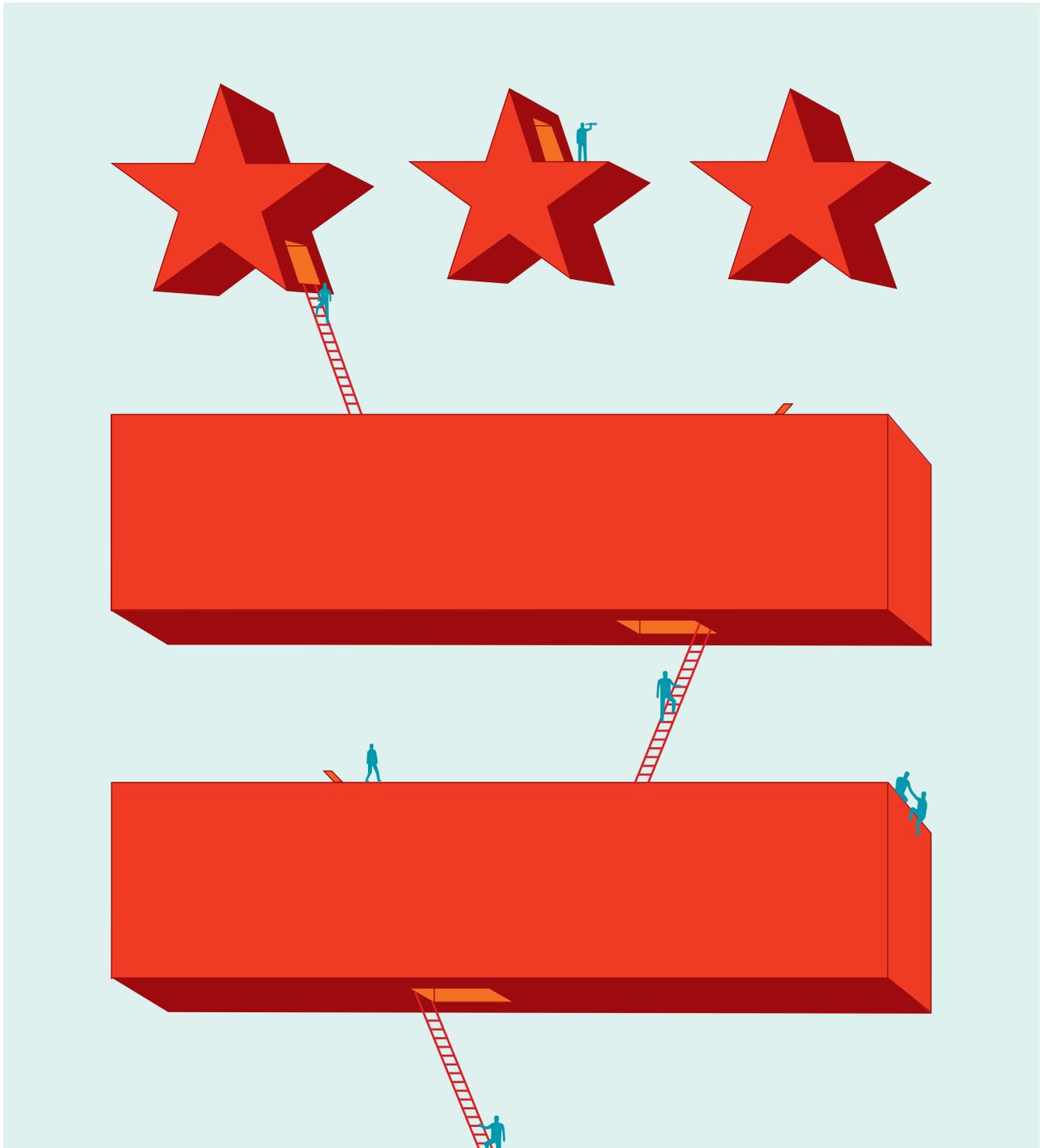


Connecting Youth to Opportunity

Better Understanding the Needs of
Disconnected Young People in Washington, DC



Executive Summary

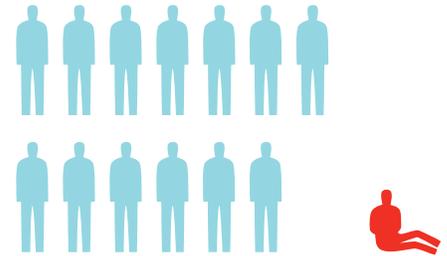
Educational attainment defines workforce success, and a robust workforce drives economic stability and growth. Therefore, everyone has a stake in developing systems that promote strong education outcomes and successful transitions to the labor market: businesses and employers that aim to simultaneously build up the next generation of consumers and strengthen the future workforce; elected officials who wish to sustain the city's current prosperity and growth; parents and concerned community members who want a vibrant, healthy community; and youth themselves, who by and large want to lead stable, productive lives.

Momentum has been building—now is the time for the District of Columbia to develop such a system. Recent studies suggest thousands of youth between the ages of 16–24 are disconnected, which is commonly understood to mean young people who are neither in school nor working. High dropout and unemployment rates and low post-secondary education attainment rates among District youth have led to a series of thoughtful and focused examinations of how the District of Columbia can reconnect youth to opportunity. Raise DC, the District's public/private partnership dedicated to establishing cradle to career alignment, is leading the charge with its focus on youth reconnection. This—combined with the engagement of the foundation sector on the needs of disconnected youth and the recognition of other government and community working groups on this emerging and high-need sector of the youth population—has opened the window of opportunity to combat youth disconnection through cohesive, evidence-driven, and cross-sector systems change.

Young people themselves are an incredibly valuable resource in this endeavor, and their input cannot be underestimated. Understanding what youth need, how they experience systems that are often designed for adult consumers and the barriers and opportunities they experience is critical to developing a system that meets their unique developmental needs.

To that end, this report highlights key findings from a recent survey and a series of focus groups with 481 youth ages 16–24 from across the District of Columbia who were at least marginally reconnected to various schools, training programs, or community based social-service organizations. This research effort was designed to better understand how, when, and why youth choose to reconnect, the barriers that prevent reconnection, and the strategies that could facilitate reconnection. Using trends identified via the survey instrument and feedback solicited in smaller focus groups, the youth voices outlined in this report emphasize that more deliberate efforts are absolutely vital in helping all young people in the District achieve lifelong success.

Drawing from this information, this report outlines six recommendations to develop a comprehensive system of services and supports that will better serve currently disconnected youth and those at greatest risk of becoming disconnected.



At least 6,720 young people (7% of the total population of 16–24 year olds) are neither in school nor working. These are the District of Columbia's “disconnected” youth.

Drastically improve the quality and accessibility of “front door” information and services available to young people

Unbiased and straightforward information that allows young people to make informed decisions about their future is often not accessible to young people early on in their attempts to reconnect. Clear, easily accessible, and youth-friendly information detailing options for reconnection is critical to ensuring youth find and connect to the appropriate opportunity. In addition to a lack of basic information on educational or workforce options, access to necessary barrier remediation services is not well coordinated for the youth consumer. A young person’s ability to access long-term wrap-around services necessary to sustain reconnection (including income or food assistance, childcare, mental and behavioral health services, and housing supports) is undermined by the complexity of the social-safety net system. The city must improve upon its current service delivery model if we want to successfully reconnect higher numbers of currently disconnected youth. Connection models that utilize the concept of a “one stop shop” (often called re-engagement or youth connection centers) have shown great promise in other jurisdictions across the country. The District should utilize the lessons learned from these approaches and develop a similar model locally.

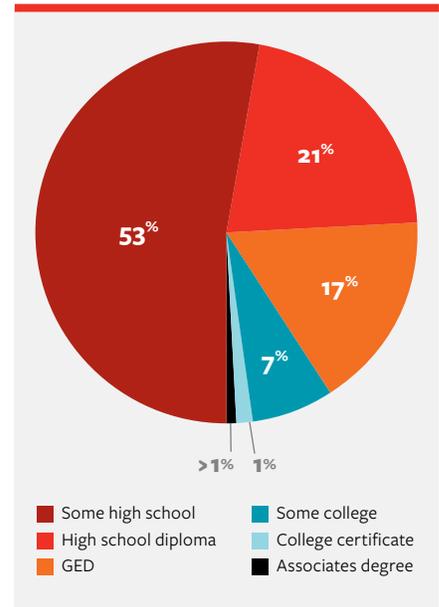
Expand the capacity of high quality, “non-traditional” educational and training sector programs

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education is currently engaging in a “multiple pathways” study to ascertain the true capacity of the non-traditional education and training system, and the educational needs of the young people currently in it. This information must inform future investments from both the private and public sector to ensure that we are expanding capacity of the current system in the correct places. Creating appropriate programming that provides “best fit” options for young people will undoubtedly lead to higher rates of success if the options are quality ones. To the extent possible, service providers who can demonstrate previous success working with this population should endeavor to expand their capacity either at existing sites or in other parts of the city.

Improve data sharing between systems that young people disconnect from and programs currently serving disconnected youth

While many individual programs collect data about their service populations and program outcomes, there is very little population-wide data on currently disconnected youth. Functionally, this means the city does not know “who” these young people are until they successfully reconnect to a program. While some young people are referred from a K–12 setting or other program directly, many youth languish between programs. Better information on youth failing to re-connect between opportunities would significantly improve the city’s capacity to execute targeted outreach while also informing the development of future program planning. Better relationships between traditional K–12 institutions (District of Columbia Public Schools and charter schools), the State education agency (Office of the State Superintendent of Education), the city’s employment agency (DC Department of Employment Services) and the current network of service providers working with the disconnected youth population must be forged and maintained. Agencies and organizations serving sub-populations of young people who are at an

Educational Attainment of All Respondents



especially high risk of disconnection (dropouts, homeless youth, system involved youth, and pregnant and parenting young people) must also establish working relationships, and to the extent possible, data-sharing agreements with providers.

Support efforts that focus on long-term engagement and success

Young people need more than a passing intervention to truly re-engage in their long-term success. However, many of the funding streams currently supporting high numbers of formerly disconnected youth expire after one or two years. In addition, programs are also not always well connected to the next level of service provision (e.g. GED to post-secondary). These issues have serious implications for the ability of youth to receive comprehensive services over an extended period of time. The District needs more long-term funding models that encourage continued engagement in education and the labor market. Concurrently, service providers need to better connect their services to other organizations or services providers at different levels of need and intervention intensity.

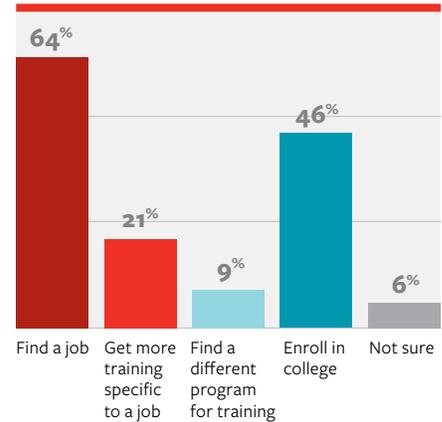
Establish formal mechanisms to solicit the opinions of youth

Young people are the best source of information about themselves and their peers, yet their opinions and ideas are often overlooked in favor of outcomes data. While this is not universally true and outcomes data is certainly important to collect, youth need to be consulted regularly about what they think is working, what is not working, and what solutions/ideas they have to make the programs in which they participate better. Soliciting these opinions will make programs stronger, help stakeholders better understand and manage a dynamic consumer population, and inform what interventions are most successful and how they could be replicated to serve more young people. Funders, both public and private, should support efforts at both the organizational and agency level to collect this kind of data.

Create a comprehensive system of disconnected youth service provision

Long-term success for the District’s young people hinges not just on the strengths of one program, agency, or organization, but on the ability of these entities to work together to form a comprehensive web of supports designed for young people. This web needs to meet young people where they are, both developmentally and geographically. Functionally, this means programs must work with one another to better communicate with young people, collect and share better data about the population they serve, establish a system/network of referrals and shared resources, and have the opportunity to share programmatic best practices.

Six-month Plans After Finishing Current School or Program



Six-month Plans for Out-of-School Youth

