

# NEWARK OPPORTUNITY YOUTH NETWORK



*A Collective  
Approach to  
Transforming  
Lives and  
Communities*

**BY PUBLIC IMPACT  
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and Juli Kim**

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The names of youth in this report have been changed to protect identities.

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**Newark Opportunity Youth Network's (Newark OYN)** mission is to establish exceptional, world-class public schools for opportunity youth that harness the intelligence and positive energy of low-income young people; prove they can achieve positive postsecondary outcomes despite overwhelming odds; and advocate to change public policies that inhibit their success. For more on OYN, please visit [newark-oyl.org](http://newark-oyl.org).

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Jerome** faced a host of challenges outside of school from as early as he can remember. As a child, he was in the foster care system, attended multiple schools in and around Newark, and was often frustrated by his circumstances. After falling behind academically, he didn't begin high school until age 16. After that school closed, Jerome turned to LEAD Charter School where teachers and staff worked closely with him to assure him that he could succeed despite his age. Jerome, now 20, graduated from LEAD in 2018 and is now pursuing his postsecondary education.

**Tyshawn** changed high schools five times in Newark. He had a history of fighting in school—which he now recognizes as an attention-seeking call for help—that earned him automatic suspensions. Tyshawn's gang involvement landed him in the juvenile justice system. After the traumatic loss of several close friends and family members, Tyshawn stopped attending school just three classes shy of graduation. But UPLIFT Academy helped push him to the finish line. As a high school graduate, and now a new father at 22, Tyshawn is employed full-time.

**Danya** also attended multiple schools in Newark—one school, she says, operated like jail, while another let students do whatever they wanted. Seeking some sense of belonging and struggling with her own attitude, Danya ended up with the wrong crowd and in constant conflict with other students. After an extended suspension for fighting, Danya received professional counseling at the Restorative Center that helped her develop self-reflection and self-control tools. Seeking a school environment where she could thrive with her newfound skills, Danya chose to attend a different school that uses restorative practices. Now 17 years old, she is on track to graduate from high school with her peers.

**Jerome, Tyshawn, and Danya** reflect the experiences of thousands of youth in Newark and across the country who were disengaged from school or close to it. But unlike too many of their peers, they had access to schools designed to meet their needs and were able to successfully reengage in their education. In the pages that follow, Public Impact tells how the Newark Opportunity Youth Network is changing the trajectory for disconnected youth and chartering its own path in the national landscape of initiatives aimed at reengaging young people in education.

## *Newark's Landscape*

In Newark, New Jersey, nearly 4,000 youth between the ages of 16 and 20 are not in school,<sup>1</sup> and about 3,000 more between 15 and 21 are at risk of leaving school without a high school diploma.<sup>2</sup> Irrespective of their school status, about half of young people between 16 and 19 and one-third between 20 and 24 are not employed.<sup>3</sup> According to those involved in supporting Newark's youth, a majority of these young people have experienced violence or other trauma, or changed schools frequently; an estimated quarter are or have been involved in the juvenile justice system, often because of an offense that occurred at school.<sup>4</sup> These youth tend to be chronically absent from school and over-age for their grade but behind in academic credits.<sup>5</sup> Not seeing a clear path to success, these youth gradually disengaged from learning. In the absence of adequate supports and interventions, they effectively became lost and misunderstood in their schools.

Outside of school, these youth face other challenges. Poverty is endemic in Newark, and formal work opportunities are limited for Newark's residents, especially for those without high school diplomas.<sup>6</sup> Young men and women of color face even greater obstacles stemming from systemic effects of historic discrimination. Health and human services typically available to low-income households are often too disjointed and uncoordinated to holistically address the needs of these young people.

This story is common across the country. In the United States, approximately 4.6 million youth ages 16 to 24 are out of school and unemployed. Disproportionately youth of color,<sup>7</sup> these young people are more likely to live in poverty, have a learning disability, and, if female, more likely to care for a child.<sup>8</sup> Many are concentrated in cities, rural areas, and tribal communities, reflecting substantial and isolated pockets of generational poverty.

The Newark Opportunity Youth Network (Newark OYN) was established to support disconnected youth, generally defined as people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither enrolled in school nor participating in the labor market. Seeking to change this narrative, Newark OYN, a collective of public and private organizations, is focused on supporting disconnected youth and transforming the way they are educated and prepared for postsecondary learning, careers, and life. Though Newark is not the only U.S. community working to address the needs of disconnected youth—increasingly referred to as “opportunity youth”—it is charting its own path to success. While most opportunity youth initiatives across the country engage community partners either to advocate for coordinated responses to challenges this population faces, or to implement or support education and ancillary services for disconnected youth, Newark OYN is doing both—and in tandem.

## *Newark OYN's Strategy*

The Newark OYN strategy reflects two key objectives. First, Newark OYN seeks to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of systemic responses to disconnected youth by bringing together key youth-serving organizations and facilitating effective channels of communication among them that lead to coordinated and collaborative service delivery for disconnected youth. Second, Newark OYN seeks to ensure that any improvements in programmatic and systemic responses are continuously supported despite inevitable changes that affect funding streams.

In pursuit of these objectives, Newark OYN's mission is three-fold:

1. Establish exceptional, world-class public schools and education programs for disconnected youth that harness their intelligence and positive energy;
2. Prove young people can achieve positive postsecondary outcomes despite overwhelming odds; and
3. Change public policies that inhibit their success.

To execute its mission, Newark OYN brings together key community partners—including disconnected youth themselves, education providers, city government entities, research and advocacy organizations, community-based service providers, and philanthropic foundations—to perform four critical tasks:

- \* **Serve as a systems-level backbone organization.** Newark OYN provides a formal infrastructure that facilitates clear and direct lines of communication among multiple private and public partners, prompting seamless collaboration toward a common vision of college and career success for disconnected youth.
- \* **Deliver direct services.** Newark OYN and its partner organizations directly operate schools and programs for disconnected youth.
- \* **Provide technical assistance.** Newark OYN supports community-based organizations and partners in applying a proven youth development model to their programming or approach to serving disconnected youth.
- \* **Advocate to influence policy.** Newark OYN taps into its direct work with disconnected youth to illuminate policies that contribute to the challenges they face. With key partners at the table, Newark OYN is positioned to influence these policies and promote improved outcomes for disconnected youth.

## *Newark OYN Partners*

Newark's opportunity youth are a diverse community with a wide range of needs that cannot be addressed by one organization. Thus, Newark OYN engages various key partners to serve and advocate for them.

**Education partners.** Newark OYN coordinates a spectrum of educational options to ensure a viable reengagement path for all disconnected youth. Through its partnership with the Newark Public Schools district, Newark OYN provides several district-based options for disconnected youth, each of which addresses a specific educational challenge. Newark OYN established LEAD Charter School, the state's

first alternative charter school—a nontraditional school designed to serve disconnected 16- to 21-year-old students. As a public school, LEAD generates a stream of public funding that supports high-quality seats specifically for disconnected youth, where none existed before.

**Community-based organizations.** Newark OYN includes well-established community-based organizations (CBOs) that have worked for decades to improve the lives of economically marginalized residents by connecting them to critical services, resources, and opportunities in health care, housing, employment, and more. Newark OYN provides financial support and technical assistance to these CBOs to allow them to create or expand educational options for disconnected youth outside of formal school settings, in addition to wraparound services that they have traditionally provided.

**Community partners.** Newark OYN has brought into the network other well-established groups whose existing services and programs enable it to address specific issues that affect disconnected youth such as access to health care, repaired relationships with community police, and support for youth who transition out of the juvenile justice system.

**Research and advocacy partners.** Recognizing that intertwined school, social, and economic factors contribute to youth disconnecting from school, Newark OYN’s strategy builds on its partners’ firsthand experience of service delivery to inform advocacy efforts and research led by such partners as Rutgers University-Newark.

**Philanthropic partners.** As partners in the Newark OYN network, foundations provide critical financial support and have also helped guide strategic planning. Local and national philanthropic partners, including Prudential Financial, the Community Foundation of New Jersey, and the Victoria Foundation, helped Newark OYN and support the network as it becomes a leader among similar efforts nationwide.

## *Newark OYN’s Impact*

Since Newark OYN’s emergence in 2016, the organization has grown rapidly and achieved critical early success, including the:

- \* Creation of over 250 new or redesigned “high-quality educational seats”—spots for disconnected youth in alternative district schools, charter schools, and programs run by community-based organizations providing high school or equivalent degrees—for disconnected youth
- \* Establishment of LEAD Charter School, the first alternative charter school in New Jersey
- \* Redesign of UPLIFT Academy, an alternative district placement for students who are over-age and under-credited that aims to get students back on track to graduate from high school
- \* Reestablishment of the Re-Engagement Center, the district’s central hub for intake, assessment, and school reenrollment

- \* Redesign of the Restorative Center, the district’s alternative placement for 14- to 20-year-old students who have been given long-term suspensions; the center uses restorative justice practices to provide a “restorative experience” for students that prepares them to reengage in learning when they return to regular schools
- \* Coordination of partners and other key groups to revise the district’s discipline policy

As of September 2018, Newark OYN programs had conducted intake for 1,843 referred students placing 291 students in 2016–17 and 371 students in 2017–18 in its high school degree or equivalency earning programs.

## *Lessons Learned*

Newark OYN leaders have gleaned early key insights about driving collective action to serve opportunity youth and set them on a path to success.

**To succeed, networks need a common vision.** Newark OYN leaders and partners share a vision that the lives of opportunity youth can be changed. Though Newark OYN partners represent diverse organizations and interests, this common vision unites them in purpose, motivating them to collaborate and coordinate their efforts to meet the needs of opportunity youth.

**When adults work together, youth benefit.** Newark OYN engages leaders invested in the educational and life outcomes for Newark’s youth to help target and streamline supports for disconnected youth. Though Newark OYN is relatively new, early indicators suggest that coordinating youth services through a systematized reengagement process and strengthening those services through targeted technical assistance leads to more effective services and more efficient service delivery.

**Opportunity youth need a new and different school experience.** Though many external factors contribute to youth disconnecting from school, traditional school settings also fail them. Thus, when they are ready to resume their education, they need a different school experience. The Newark OYN model reflects the understanding that relationships in the school setting need to change; that school design elements—curriculum, schedules, performance measures, social and emotional supports, staffing structures, and physical space—have to meet youth where they are; and that students need to be empowered by owning both the decisions that caused them to go off-track and the decisions that will put them back on-track.

**Opportunity youth respond to relatable role models who believe in them.** In response to the wide range of disconnected youths’ needs, Newark OYN offers a multifaceted set of supports, including a dedicated and experienced staff that reflects the diversity of the students it serves and understands their lives. In addition, because opportunity youth face challenges related to race and ethnicity, poverty, and institutionalized discrimination, youth in Newark OYN are empowered by seeing positive, successful, intelligent, community-minded people who look like them actively working to change lives and systems.

## Newark OYN's Next Steps

Newark OYN's plans for the future are as ambitious in scope as its accomplishments to date. In the years ahead, Newark OYN aims to build on the success of its first two years, focusing on four fundamental areas:

- \* **Increasing high-quality educational seats.** Newark OYN plans to increase seats in the network of schools and programs that serve disconnected youth while simultaneously refining their quality.
- \* **Enhancing capacity.** Newark OYN is focused on building capacity of its partners and programs to collect, analyze, and report data; guide youth to post-secondary pathways that lead to a viable career; develop network leaders; and support expansion of the Newark OYN model beyond the city.
- \* **Ensuring funding sustainability.** With no public source of revenue dedicated explicitly to reengaging disconnected youth, Newark OYN relies on the collective resources of its private and public partners. The network also expects that LEAD Charter School will be sustained by per-pupil public school funding without need for additional philanthropic support.
- \* **Advocating for policy changes that support opportunity youth.** Long-term and sustained improvements require widespread recognition of critical factors contributing to disconnection as well as collective efforts to measure and address these challenges. Newark OYN will pursue an advocacy agenda to positively influence city and state policies that support opportunity youth or at-risk students.

### Notes

1. Based on a data analysis conducted by Newark Public Schools obtained from OYN indicating that in the 2014–15 school year, about 3,880 students between ages 16 and 20 years had left school. Federal census data indicates that in 2015, 5,942 young people between ages 18 and 24 did not have a high school degree. U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Educational attainment*.

2. Based on a data analysis conducted by Newark Public Schools and obtained from OYN indicating that in the 2014–15 school year, 33 percent of enrolled students between ages 15 and 21 were over-age and under-credited.

3. Based on federal census data from 2014–16. U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.)

4. Based on interviews with OYN staff in June 2018.

5. In the 2014–15 school year, NPS data obtained from OYN suggests that 33 percent of enrolled students between ages 15 and 21 were over-age and under-credited.

6. Only 18 percent of jobs in Newark are held by Newark's residents. See: New Jersey Institute for Social Justice. (2017). *Bridging the two Americas: Employment & economic opportunity in Newark & beyond*. Newark, NJ: Author. Retrieved from [https://community-wealth.org/sites/clone.community-wealth.org/files/downloads/Bridging\\_the\\_Two\\_Americas\\_rev\\_5-11a\\_Without\\_Crop\\_Marks.pdf](https://community-wealth.org/sites/clone.community-wealth.org/files/downloads/Bridging_the_Two_Americas_rev_5-11a_Without_Crop_Marks.pdf)

7. Burd-Sharps, S. & Lewis, K. (2018). *More than a million reasons for hope: Youth disconnection in America today*. Measure of America of the Social Service Research Council. Retrieved from <https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/dy18.full.report.pdf>

8 Burd-Sharps & Lewis. (2018). *Measure of America*.



## INTRODUCTION

***Outside of school, I had a lot of challenges.*** I'm from Newark. Growing up, I spent a lot of time in foster homes. I didn't really have parents in my life—I had them, but they weren't there. I pretty much raised myself since the age of 8. I had a home and food, but it was just shelter. I had to learn everything on my own—how to teach myself right and wrong, what to do and what not to do. In the seventh grade, when I was living in Jersey City with my dad, I was constantly in fights and missed school. But the school still promoted me to eighth grade even though I didn't finish the seventh grade. When I came back to Newark, my new school asked me to do seventh grade over. I was cool with that because I actually liked school. But then I ended up in the eighth grade at 14 and was 16 when I entered high school. At first it was OK, but then around sophomore and junior years, it went all the way downhill. I felt like the school was against me because I was a little older than a lot of the kids. Students and teachers would bully me with jokes like, "You need to drop out," or "You're too old to be here." So, during my junior year, I only went to school when I got bored of being at home all day. I didn't go to school to do work, just to hang out with a couple people. Then the school shut down and I wasn't in any school at all.—Jerome, 20

In Newark, New Jersey, nearly 4,000 youth between the ages of 16 and 20 are not in school,<sup>1</sup> and about 3,000 more between 15 and 21 are at risk of leaving school without a high school diploma.<sup>2</sup> Irrespective of their school status, about half of young people between 16 and 19 and one-third between 20 and 24 are not employed.<sup>3</sup> According to those involved in supporting Newark's youth, a majority of these youth have experienced violence or other trauma, or changed schools frequently; an estimated quarter are or have been involved in the juvenile justice system, often because of an offense that occurred at school.<sup>4</sup> These youth tend to be chronically absent from school, missing at least 1 out of every 10 days,<sup>5</sup> and over-age for their grade but behind in academic credits.<sup>6</sup> Too often, they were struggling readers in their early elementary years who fell more behind each year.<sup>7</sup> In most cases, their needs went beyond what the traditional school system can provide. Not seeing a clear path to success, these youth gradually disengaged from learning. Lacking adequate supports and interventions, they effectively became lost and misunderstood in their schools.

Outside of school, these youth face other challenges. Poverty is endemic in Newark, and especially concentrated in certain areas. In the city's Central Ward, the poverty rate is 50 percent, much higher than the national rate of 15 percent.<sup>8</sup> Seventy percent of Newark's children live in low-income households, more than double the state rate.<sup>9</sup> Formal work opportunities are limited for Newark's residents, especially for those without high school diplomas.<sup>10</sup> Young men and women of color face even greater obstacles stemming from systemic effects of historic discrimination. Health and human services typically available to low-income households are too disjointed and uncoordinated to holistically address the needs of these young people.

This story is common across the country. In the United States, approximately 4.6 million (about 11 percent, or one in nine) youth between the ages of 16 and 24 are out of school and unemployed.<sup>11</sup> Disproportionately youth of color,<sup>12</sup> these young people are more likely to live in poverty and more likely to live with family other than their parents, especially if they identify as LGBTQ or have experienced physical or sexual abuse. They are more likely to have a learning disability, and for female youth, more likely to care for a child.<sup>13</sup> Many are concentrated in cities, rural areas, and tribal communities reflecting substantial and isolated pockets of generational poverty.

The economic toll of youth being out of school and work reverberates in the larger society. The societal costs of one disconnected youth—measured by lost earnings and tax revenue, social service payments, health care costs, and criminal justice expenses—adds up to \$50,000 per year, or over \$300 billion for all disconnected youth nationwide.<sup>14</sup> In New Jersey, increasing the overall high school graduation rate by just 3 percent (or 2,800 additional graduates) would result in a \$45 million increase in the state's annual earnings, \$29 million in new annual spending, \$7.7 million in additional annual state and local tax revenues, and a \$58 million boost in the state's gross product.<sup>15</sup>

Newark Opportunity Youth Network (Newark OYN) was established to support disconnected youth, generally defined as people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither enrolled in school nor participating in the labor market. Seeking to

change this narrative, Newark OYN, a collective of public and private organizations, is focused on addressing the challenges that disconnected youth face (see “Newark OYN Partners, 2018,” page 23). Together they are:

- \* Implementing educational and workforce development programs—including the state’s first alternative charter school—to serve youth disengaged or at risk of disengaging from school;
- \* Coordinating funding and technical assistance to support these programs;
- \* Mobilizing city, community, and school district resources to identify disconnected youth and connect them to Newark OYN programs and community-based services; and
- \* Changing systemic policies and practices to create positive outcomes for disconnected youth.

The network partners recognize that their response to the challenges disconnected youth face present great opportunity to improve not only individual lives, but also the city’s economic and social viability.

“[W]e recognize the assets these young men and women can be for our city,” Newark OYN Chief Executive Officer Robert Clark said in 2016 when it was founded.<sup>16</sup> United in the belief that disconnected youth—increasingly referred to as “opportunity youth”—are one of the nation’s greatest untapped resources, Newark OYN leaders are committed to improving educational and other supports that will give these youth the equitable opportunities to realize their full potential.

Early indicators suggest that their efforts are producing results. From its establishment in 2016 through September 2018, Newark OYN has conducted intake for 1,843 referred students placing 291 students in 2016–17 and 371 students in 2017–18 in its high school degree or equivalency earning programs.

Newark is not the only U.S. community working to address the needs of disconnected youth, but it is charting its own path to success. Most opportunity youth initiatives across the country engage community partners either to advocate for coordinated responses to challenges this population faces, or to implement education services targeting disconnected youth and supports for education providers. Newark OYN is doing both—and in tandem.

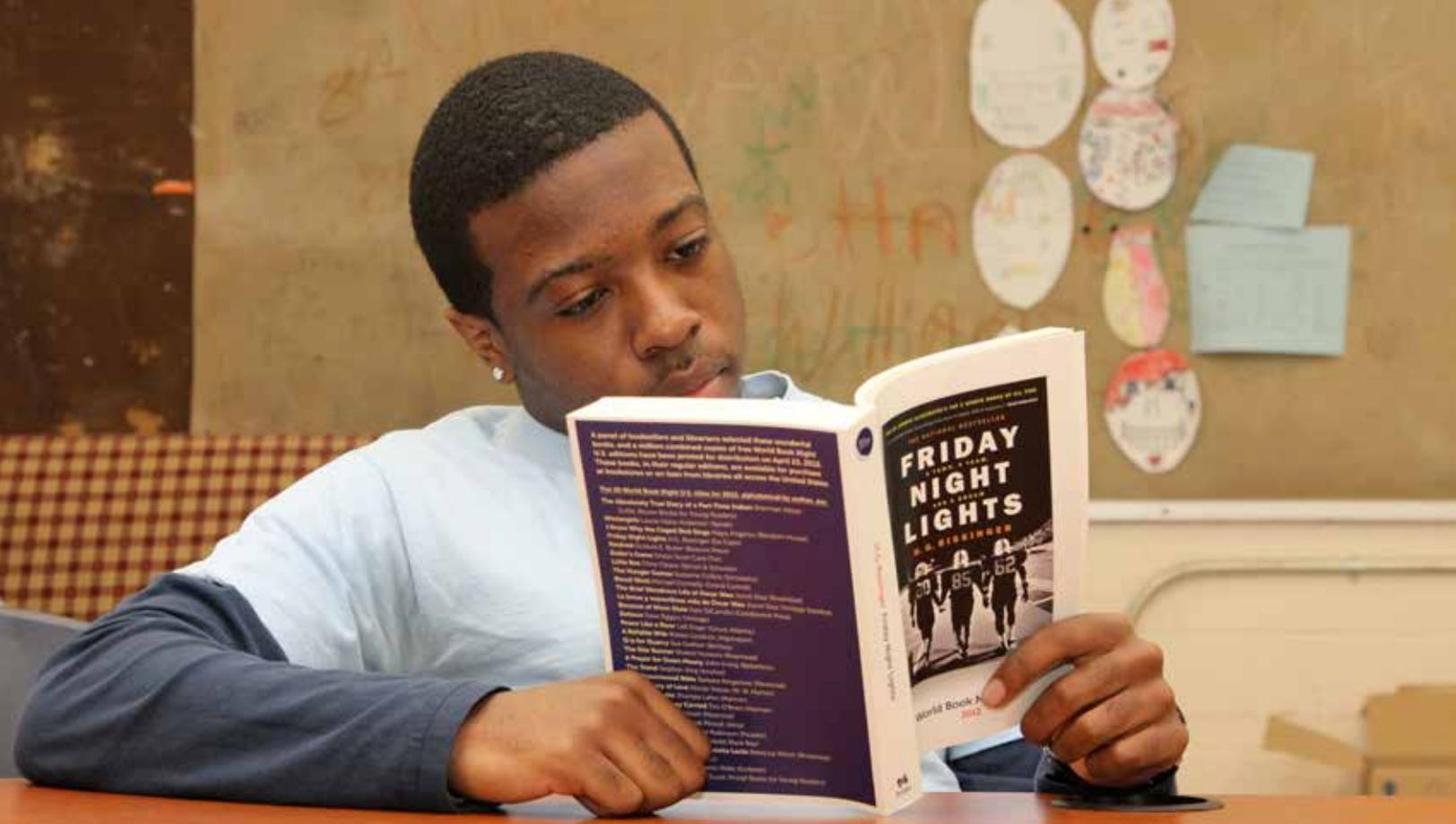
In Newark, key organizations, including schools and high-functioning community organizations, formed this network to support disconnected youth and transform the way they are educated and prepared for postsecondary learning, careers, and life. Its collective programs and supports are designed to develop and hone the leadership skills of the youth it serves. Through their coordinated and collaborative efforts, the Newark OYN partners are positioned to effect systems-level change. As an intermediary entity coordinating this network of partners, Newark OYN bridges communication between those making policy decisions and those on the ground working directly with opportunity youth. Its theory is that this connection will illuminate the systemic changes needed to address youth disengagement, then drive resources to the organizations that are most effective at getting disconnected youth back on track. Ultimately, Newark will be stronger as reengaged youth contribute to and drive affirmative changes in their communities.

But realizing the limitations of trying to create a quality educational seat for every disconnected youth in Newark within Newark OYN, the network aims to learn through its efforts exactly what supports, services, and policy changes are crucial for positive outcomes for disconnected youth, and how to spur communities to implement and sustain those solutions.

In the pages that follow, Public Impact tells Newark OYN's story—its guiding strategy, approach, partner network, early accomplishments, plans for growth, and place in the national landscape of opportunity youth initiatives.



*“Newark OYN brings coherence and structure to programs that aim to reconnect disconnected youth, and it permits various partners to advocate, create policy, and create opportunities to serve them better.”*  
—Nancy Cantor,  
Rutgers University-  
Newark chancellor



## NEWARK OYN'S STRATEGY

**N**ewark OYN's strategy reflects two key objectives: (1) increase the effectiveness and efficiency of systemic responses to disconnected youth and (2) ensure that initiatives are sustainable.

Traditionally, Newark's youth education and workforce development providers worked independently of each other. Newark OYN's strategy focuses on bringing together key youth-serving organizations and facilitating effective channels of communication among them that lead to coordinated and collaborative service delivery resulting in improved outcomes for disconnected youth. To accomplish this, Newark OYN's strategy builds on the strengths of partner organizations and enhances their collective capacity to identify, engage, and serve disconnected youth, and creates accountability mechanisms that ensure lasting, high-quality services.

All improvement efforts are made with an eye toward sustainability in both infrastructure and funding. Newark OYN aims to ensure that effective strategies and solutions for disconnected youth remain in place over the long term and are continuously supported regardless of inevitable changes in leadership, public agendas, or funding streams.

In pursuit of these objectives, Newark OYN's mission is three-fold:

- \* Establish exceptional, world-class public schools and education programs for disconnected youth that harness their intelligence and positive energy;
- \* Prove that young people can achieve positive postsecondary outcomes despite overwhelming odds; and
- \* Change public policies that inhibit their success.

Newark OYN brings together key community partners—including disconnected youth themselves, education providers, city government entities, research and advocacy organizations, community-based service providers, and philanthropic foundations—to perform four critical tasks:

- \* **Serve as a systems-level backbone organization.** Newark OYN provides a formal infrastructure to facilitate clear and direct lines of communication among private and public partners, prompting seamless collaboration toward a common vision of college and career success for disconnected youth.
- \* **Deliver direct services.** Newark OYN and its partner organizations directly operate schools and programs for disconnected youth, including:
  - A centralized intake center that receives all students referred to OYN, conducts assessments, and coordinates all placements into OYN programs;
  - The state's first alternative charter school specifically designed to serve disconnected youth;
  - An alternative district placement for students who are over-age, under-credited, and have attempted at least two years of high school;
  - An alternative district placement for students under long-term suspension;
  - Two community-based organizations that offer credit-bearing high school equivalency and workforce development programs along with holistic services such as housing, child care, and financial counseling.
- \* **Provide technical assistance.** Newark OYN supports community-based organizations and network partners in applying a proven youth development model to their programming (see "Newark OYN Model Builds Conditions for Learning," page 16).
- \* **Advocate to influence policy.** Newark OYN taps into its direct work with disconnected youth to illuminate policies that contribute to challenges they face. With key partners at the table, Newark OYN is positioned to influence these policies and promote improved outcomes for disconnected youth.

In executing these functions, Newark OYN shares information among its partners in order to foster a system-wide understanding of the major needs of and the most promising solutions for disconnected youth. In turn, this informs its work to influence system-level policy changes needed to improve outcomes for disconnected youth. By simultaneously providing direct services and advocating for systemic policy change, Newark OYN illuminates the challenges facing disconnected youth, offers workable solutions, and amplifies the collective and unified voices seeking better outcomes for disconnected youth.



*“We build conditions for learning—a strong culture, strong relationships, and student’s ability to trust adults.”*

—Mark Comesañas,  
Newark Opportunity Youth Network’s executive director of programs and instruction

## NEWARK OYN MODEL BUILDS CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING

The Newark OYN model reflects its partners’ commitment to a common vision, set of core values and philosophy, and principles for measurement, assessment, research, and design. The essential elements of the Newark OYN model are:<sup>1</sup>

**VISION:** The Newark OYN vision is to:

- \* Establish exceptional, world-class public schools and education programs for opportunity youth that harness the intelligence and positive energy of low-income young people.
- \* Prove that young people can achieve positive post-secondary outcomes despite overwhelming odds.
- \* Change public policies that inhibit the success of opportunity youth.

**RESEARCH-BASED PRINCIPLES:** Newark OYN-affiliated schools and programs incorporate these research-based principles for youth development and student learning into program delivery:

- \* Engage youth in owning their development process by fostering positive identification, resilience, and emotional and moral competence.<sup>2</sup>
- \* Personalize learning experiences so students advance through cognitive skills and content knowledge at their own pace and with appropriate supports.<sup>3</sup>



**DESIGN ELEMENTS:** Newark OYN schools and programs incorporate design elements that promote a welcoming environment, help youth develop positive relationships with caring adults, and foster structures that address the needs of the individual learner. In OYN schools and programs, youth should:

- \* Feel welcomed in the environment.
- \* Have staff to support them academically, socially, and emotionally.
- \* Connect and build relationships with each other and staff.
- \* Have opportunities to lead.
- \* Move at their own pace, but with support so that learning is rigorous, accelerated, and relevant.
- \* Have individual schedules that reflect their needs.

**ACCOUNTABILITY:** Newark OYN gathers data from individual students as well as from whole schools and programs to assess its progress toward achieving:

- \* *Student academic growth.* Newark OYN collects data regarding the academic growth of its students, including assessment measures such as NWEA MAP and cognitive skills rubrics,<sup>4</sup> attainment of a high school diploma or equivalent, industry-recognized trade certifications, post-secondary placements, and persistence.
- \* *Student personal growth.* Newark OYN collects data regarding students' personal growth, such as survey data that measure mindsets, essential skills, and habits (MESH) or other social-emotional measures;<sup>5</sup> youth participation in one-on-one counseling, daily therapeutic groups, and personal reflection exercises; and absentee rates.
- \* *Sustained personal development.* Newark OYN provides transition services to program alumni and tracks their progress toward attaining their post-secondary goals.

## Notes

1. This list's structure is adapted from the approach to understanding school models outlined in The Aligned School Model Framework in: Summit Learning. (2017). The science of Summit. Retrieved from <https://blog.summitlearning.org/2017/08/science-of-summit-framework-research/>
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3. See Summit Public Schools. (2017). Science of Summit.
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# ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF NEWARK OYN

## EMERGENCE OF NEWARK OYN

Since 2005, YouthBuild Newark, the local affiliate of the eponymous national organization, has worked with disconnected, low-income youth between the ages of 16 and 24 years old to provide a pathway toward earning their GEDs while gaining on-the-job experience from community building projects. Under the leadership of founder and executive director Robert Clark, a former disconnected youth himself, YouthBuild Newark honed its own model for successfully serving disconnected youth that helped earn Clark credibility with national and state education reformers beginning to focus attention on Newark. Clark worked with Newark Public Schools to implement comprehensive reforms—famously funded by Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg<sup>1</sup>—to assess and redesign the district’s alternative high school program. As a result of this partnership, YouthBuild Newark began operating a new alternative high school in the district in 2011.

Through this work, Clark and other Newark leaders recognized how coordinated efforts across the city had the potential to achieve more for disconnected youth than any one organization alone. In 2014, Rutgers University hosted an inaugural forum for the city’s leaders to examine—for the first time—data on all the challenges that disconnected youth face—and the implications for the city’s economy. Leadership transitions within Newark Public Schools, coupled with Prudential Financial’s burgeoning interest in disconnected youth issues, created the necessary conditions to formalize nascent partnerships emerging from YouthBuild Newark’s work.

In 2015, the city of Newark, Newark Public Schools, YouthBuild Newark, Rutgers University-Newark, several community-based organizations, and leading foundations planned and launched Newark’s Opportunity Youth Network (OYN), an initiative that united private and public partners around a collective impact strategy designed to increase coordination and communication among youth services providers. Their underlying commitment to improving services for disconnected youth was critical to creating effective and efficient support systems and to directing more resources to disconnected youth. Moreover, formalizing these partnerships under an organization separate from YouthBuild Newark and Newark Public Schools highlighted the multi-faceted issues and solutions to youth disengagement.

Newark OYN’s roots in YouthBuild Newark allowed it to accelerate quickly and with credibility. Newark OYN was established as an initiative operating under the fiscal sponsorship of YouthBuild Newark, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and under the leadership of YouthBuild Newark Executive Director Robert Clark. Accordingly, it benefits from a long history of experience and institutional knowledge gained from over a decade of successful YouthBuild Newark operations and programming. YouthBuild Newark oversees the financial administration of Newark OYN

personnel and programs, including serving as a charter management organization for LEAD Charter School (see “LEAD Charter School: A different school experience,” page 30). Recognizing the initial success and ongoing potential of Newark OYN, YouthBuild Newark began doing business as Newark Opportunity Youth Network in December 2018.

## **NEWARK OYN GOVERNANCE**

Described by colleagues as a fast-paced visionary and servant leader, Robert Clark connects leaders of partner organizations across the network and oversees an executive team that manages Newark OYN. A graduate of YouthBuild Boston, he is the first YouthBuild graduate to establish a YouthBuild program. As an African-American man who reengaged in his own education through an education and workforce development program, Clark has lived the life of those whom Newark OYN serves. His experience and deep respect for the experiences of disconnected youth informs Newark OYN’s focus on building trust and community among the young people served, identifying unique solutions to intractable problems that stem from systemic inequality, and inspiring an organizational culture committed to equity.

A program leadership team oversees the implementation of Newark OYN initiatives. This team consists of about 30 individuals from Newark OYN-affiliated programs, including leaders and staff from the Re-Engagement Center, UPLIFT Academy, LEAD Charter School, YouthBuild Newark, and affiliated community organizations. United by a common commitment to opportunity youth and a vision for Newark OYN, the program leadership team models the personal investment they hope to evoke from the students they serve.

## **NEWARK OYN BUDGET**

In the 2017–18 fiscal year, Newark OYN’s operating budget totaled \$4.8 million (see Figure 1, page 20) to support personnel, program, operations, and facilities costs for Newark OYN programs, which include YouthBuild Newark, LEAD Charter School, the Re-Engagement Center (REC), the Restorative Center, and UPLIFT Academy. The budget also included \$500,000 in funding allocated to its partner community-based organizations (see “Community-Based Organizations,” page 37.).

At about 40 percent, the majority of Newark OYN’s 2017–18 income came from philanthropic and other private sources (see Figure 2, page 20). Federal and state funds amount to about 14 percent of the budgeted income; this includes grants for operating YouthBuild Newark and per-pupil funding for LEAD Charter School. Newark Public Schools provides 28 percent of OYN’s funding (see “Newark Public Schools,” page 24.).

LEAD Charter School is expected to generate enough revenue—from per pupil funds and management fees paid out of per pupil funds to charter operators—to sustain itself without need for additional philanthropic support, assuming benefits from economies of scale realized as it increases its enrollment (see “LEAD Charter School: A different school experience,” page 30).

*“In Newark, we wanted dollars to go beyond the intermediary organization to innovation at the local level—like at the community-based organizations—to produce favorable results with opportunity youth directly.”*  
 —Robert Clark, Newark Opportunity Youth Network’s chief executive officer

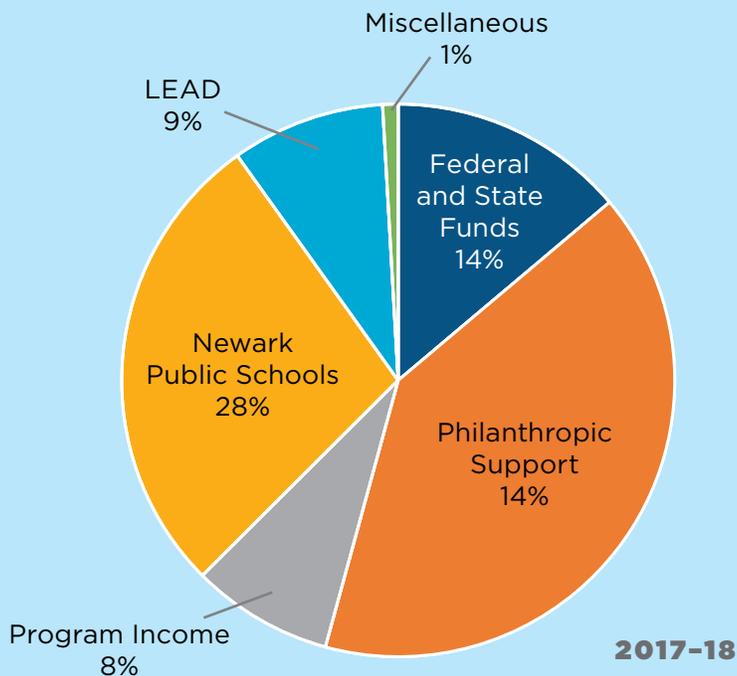


**Figure 1.**  
 2017-18 Newark OYN Expenses: \$4.8 million

- Federal and state funds
- Program Income
- LEAD (charter management fees)
- Philanthropic support
- Newark Public Schools
- Misc. (including municipal funding)

**Notes**

1. Charter management fees are paid to operators from per pupil funds allocated to charter schools.
2. Program income is generated from construction projects YouthBuild Newark students participate in as part of job site training.



**Figure 2.**  
 2017-18 Newark OYN Income: \$5.1 million

# NEWARK OYN MILESTONES

**2011**

YouthBuild Newark begins consultation with Newark Public Schools to redesign district alternative education programs; in partnership with the district, YouthBuild Newark opens a transfer school, or an alternative school for students who are over-age and under-credited, and who were often previously suspended for a significant number of days.

**2013**

YouthBuild Newark partners with Newark Public Schools to support the operations of a second district transfer school.

**2014**

Rutgers University and Newark Public Schools co-sponsor the GradNation Summit, sparking conversations about enhancing the city's response to disconnected youth.

**2016**

Newark's mayor's office, Newark Public Schools, Rutgers University, and four Newark community organizations form Newark's Opportunity Youth Network (OYN).

Newark OYN re-establishes the city's Re-Engagement Center (REC), a centralized entity that oversees initial intake processes to reengage disconnected youth.

Newark OYN facilitates the School Discipline Work Group and discussions leading to Newark Public Schools' board-approved revision of the district's discipline policy.

Newark OYN works with the district to align the Restorative Center, the district's center for youth under long-term suspension, with the revised discipline policy.

Two district transfer schools receiving support from Newark OYN merge into one campus, UPLIFT Academy, to streamline services and strengthen programming for students.

YouthBuild Newark receives a charter from the New Jersey Department of Education to open LEAD Charter School, the state's first alternative charter school.

**2017**

YouthBuild Newark opens LEAD Charter School, the state's first alternative charter school, with 129 students.

Newark OYN leadership collaborates with and learns from other members of the Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Forum.

The New Jersey Department of Education approves expansion of LEAD from 240 to 480 seats.

1. See Kim, J., Hassel, B. C., Hargrave, E., Boast, L., Holly, C., & Ellison, S. (2015). *Early lessons from Newark's experience with charter schools*. Menlo Park, CA: Startup:Education. Retrieved from [https://publicimpact.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Early\\_Lessons\\_from-Newark's\\_Experience\\_With\\_Charter\\_Schools-Public\\_Impact.pdf](https://publicimpact.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Early_Lessons_from-Newark's_Experience_With_Charter_Schools-Public_Impact.pdf)



## NEWARK OYN PARTNERS

***I only needed three classes to graduate.** I'm from Newark. I didn't really have a choice to join a gang, I was born into it. I went to five high schools over three or four years in Newark, Elizabeth, and Linden. I had good attendance, but I usually got sent home early after getting in trouble. Every school I went to, I got suspended and later expelled. It was mainly because of fighting with other students or teachers. Anger was sparking all of this. I also got suspended because of smoking. They sent me to a drug program and I didn't go, so I got expelled. My mother tried to put me in another school, but I had issues with some students since I'm from a certain place and because of the people I hung around with. At all these schools, if I got into a fight, the security guards break it up, and nobody talked to resolve anything. They would look at the cameras, suspend me, and wouldn't even listen to what I had to say about it. A lot of teachers in regular high schools didn't give me a helping hand. I'd get my schedule, go to class, get a packet of work, and that's it. I'd have to figure it out by myself. When I had CTE [career and technical education], they didn't check on me to help me out. I needed an extra push because I didn't know what to do or where to go. When I finally went back to school, I lost it when my brother and my right-hand man both died. I went back to hanging in the street. I had only three classes left for two years that I could never finish—just Spanish and two sciences. I was in and out of the street, caught up with police and others. I became a parent, too. I didn't want to be one of those people who wasn't around to help take care of my son. That's when I realized that I needed to finish high school, and I was able to do it at UPLIFT because they believed in me and didn't give up on me.—Tyshawn, 22*

**N**ewark’s opportunity youth are a diverse community with a wide range of needs that cannot be addressed by one organization. Thus, Newark OYN engages a range of key community partners—spanning education, nonprofit, government, and philanthropic organizations—to serve and advocate for them. This partner network underpins Newark OYN’s strategy. The network is unified in mission and purpose, creating channels of communication that facilitate collaboration and coordination among partners. Through professional development, data collection and analysis, and technical assistance, Newark OYN leaders and staff enhance the strengths of each partner. Network-wide coordination and support for direct services improves each partner’s effectiveness and efficiency in addressing the needs of disconnected youth and informs the systems-level policy changes for which Newark OYN advocates.

*“In the past, we were all working in our own silos. That narrative has changed over the last few years with Newark OYN—partners are looking at what each other is doing and seeing how the work can be complementary.”*  
**—Antoinette Baskerville Richardson, Newark’s chief education officer**

## Newark OYN Partners, 2018

Opportunity Youth	Education Partners	Community-Based Partners	City-based Partners	Community Partners	Research and Advocacy Partner	Philanthropic Partners
Approximately 7,000 Newark youth aged 16-24 who left school or at risk of leaving school without a high school diploma.	LEAD Charter School Newark Public Schools (Re-Engagement Center, UPLIFT Academy, Restorative Center)	La Casa de Don Pedro New Community Corporation	City of Newark My Brother’s Keeper Newark	New Jersey Institute for Social Justice Rutgers New Jersey Medical Schools’s Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine Clinic Multi-Disciplinary Aftercare Planning Team	Rutgers University-Newark	Prudential Financial Community Foundation of New Jersey Victoria Foundation MCJ Amelior Foundation ECMC Foundation Newark Charter School Fund NewSchools Venture Fund Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative

*“We offer touchpoints throughout the Newark OYN community. Students know they can reach us whenever they need to. The buildings are always open.”*—Newark OYN educator

## **Education Providers**

Newark OYN works with the local school district, charter sector, LEAD Charter School, and community-based organizations to provide disconnected youth with a set of high-quality educational options that lead to a high school diploma. These options include district-managed placements, a district transfer high school, an alternative charter high school, and community-based education and workforce development programs.

### **NEWARK PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Newark OYN’s partnership with Newark Public Schools (NPS) generates both program and policy changes. Through this partnership, Newark OYN provides several district-based education options for disconnected youth, each of which uses a tailored approach to address a specific educational challenge. NPS and Newark OYN work collaboratively to operate these programs with Newark OYN providing staff development and other supports to ensure alignment with OYN principles and maximum coordination with other network partners. Newark OYN partners with NPS to strengthen these programs to expand and develop the district’s capacity to address the needs of disconnected youth while simultaneously creating coordinated citywide options for them, including the Re-Engagement Center (REC), UPLIFT Academy, the Restorative Center, and educational programs at community-based organizations (CBOs). In turn, NPS provides district resources to support Newark OYN-affiliated CBOs to provide educational programming that allows students to earn a high school equivalency degree.

In addition to funding, NPS dedicates two district employees to serve as Newark OYN directors of programming and technical assistance, who are charged with monitoring and ensuring quality of educational programs. (See “Community-Based Organizations,” page 37.)

Newark OYN’s partnership with the district also facilitated changes in district-wide policy and practices, including revisions to the district’s discipline policy and the introduction of restorative justice practices to NPS comprehensive high schools, which may prevent students from becoming disengaged from school.

### **District-based education options for opportunity youth**

**Re-Engagement Center.** Known as the REC, the Re-Engagement Center is the epicenter of Newark OYN’s efforts to help disconnected youth get back in school. Begun in 2008, the district closed the REC in 2014. Newark OYN reopened it in 2016 to serve as its central hub for coordinating assessment and program placement. The REC’s staff recruits and receives students who have left or are at risk of leaving high school, conducts assessments to determine individual needs (including the youth’s readiness and commitment to reengaging), initiates the reengagement process, and facilitates placement in an OYN education program. As the single place to go for intake, assessment, and school reenrollment, the REC helps improve Newark OYN’s efficiencies and economies of scale.

**A known place to go.** The REC is widely known in Newark. REC staff hold in-person information sessions and one-on-one meetings with NPS principals, social workers, charter school leaders, juvenile justice and court officials, and providers at city-based organizations. They distribute fliers throughout the community and use digital media marketing to publicize, and benefit from former Newark OYN students and opportunity youth spreading the word about the REC. Students come on their own, without referrals, and the REC receives referrals from district and charter schools and other youth service agencies and programs.

**Relationship-based reengagement.** At the REC, staff implement an intense one-to-two-week reengagement process that incorporates Newark OYN’s relationship-building principles. Newark OYN employs former social workers and youth service case managers to serve as “transition liaisons” to all youth who come through the REC. These liaisons guide youth through three to four meetings or “touchpoints,” during which youth participate in counseling and assessments designed to identify their academic, emotional, and social needs as well as their aspirations. Liaisons and opportunity youth continue to maintain close contact after youth are placed in the Newark OYN-affiliated education program best suited to their needs. Reflecting the OYN and REC motto—“Trust the process”—the consistent presence of transition liaisons is intended to help foster a reliable, trusting relationship for youth reengaging in school.

**Data-rich intake process.** At intake, REC staff collect three key data points that inform placement in Newark OYN educational programs. The Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) assessment provides useful insight into emotional readiness to take exams as well as current level of performance in math, reading, and language. Qualitative data from case notes recorded during intake and other meetings provide information on the youth’s strengths, preferences for academic placement, and needed services. All intake data leads to an individual development plan, the basis for an education placement recommendation. All of the collected information is provided to the network-affiliated program(s) where youth are eventually placed, ensuring that those placements are better positioned to support them. The development plan continues to record the youth’s reengagement process and short- and long-term goals.

**UPLIFT Academy.** UPLIFT Academy is an alternative district placement for students who are over-age, under-credited, and have attempted at least two years of high school. UPLIFT Academy—as of this writing—is the district’s only “transfer school,” a high school designed to serve older students who are behind their grade-level peers in attaining credits needed to earn a high school diploma or equivalent. UPLIFT aims for students to get back on track; graduate from high school; and be academically, socially, and emotionally prepared to execute their post-secondary and/or career plan.

Though an NPS school, Newark OYN provides certain services as well as technical assistance to teaching and support staff. These supports focus on social-emotional learning and counseling techniques that are aligned with the Newark OYN strategy for serving disconnected youth. For example, Newark OYN provides

*“We see the protective walls come down brick by brick as students open up and respond to offers of help. We’re here to help the students identify their barriers and reach their inner person and potential.”*

—Newark OYN  
advocate counselor

UPLIFT with advocate counselors who build relationships with students that go beyond what a typical guidance counselor can provide, such as reaching out when they are absent from school and conducting intensive counseling services. Newark OYN also provides ongoing professional development to UPLIFT staff through Newark OYN leadership team meetings and Newark OYN's Annual Summer Institute, a two-week collaborative professional learning session.



## ***Meet Rahem, 22, UPLIFT Academy graduate***

***Teachers got to know me as a person.*** When I came to UPLIFT, getting used to the mental part and the school's philosophy was hard for me—understanding unity, purpose, all of that. It was a different experience, but I got the hang of it. At UPLIFT, teachers got to know me as a person—and look past the attitude I used to have. They pushed me forward to see where I needed to be challenged. At first, I had no idea about being challenged since I had never been challenged academically, only really in basketball when my coach pushed our team. At UPLIFT, they didn't treat me like I wasn't worth anything. They showed me that I am worth more than what people think. They helped me understand that I can't put one foot in and one foot out; I have to put both feet in. I had a lot of leadership opportunities at UPLIFT—leading the circle in the morning or talking to students who got into confrontations. At UPLIFT, if something happened, we would sit and talk to each other. At first, I was shocked. I didn't know they did that in a school. It was brand new to me. In my four years at UPLIFT, there were only two to four fights altogether.

***I can't do it all alone.*** UPLIFT is different from other schools because they showed they care for me. The staff and students are like family—no matter each person's color. Everybody gets along. Beyond the teachers, the advocate counselor at UPLIFT checked on me to help me out. When I was slipping, they helped me. They are people who were on my side and stuck their neck out for me since I realized that I can't do it all alone. They were happy when I finally graduated. Eventually, they helped me get the job I have now. I'm a food service worker at LEAD Charter School. It is better for me and my son because I can drop him off and pick him up from school. I like everything about working at LEAD, especially working with the students—some I went to school with and I know them from the streets. I would like to interact with them, but I know I need to keep my distance since I'm a professional. Most of them see me as a role model.

**Restorative Center.** The Restorative Center is the district’s placement option for 14- to 20-year-old students who have received long-term suspensions. Under the district’s revised discipline policy (see “NPS Discipline Policy,” page 29), students may not serve more than a total of 25 days per year on suspension, so an individual student’s length of stay at the Restorative Center is potentially limited by the length of previous short-term suspensions. Because students sent to the Restorative Center have many risk factors for disconnecting from school,<sup>17</sup> it is a critical point of engagement for Newark OYN.

**Space to reflect.** Since Newark OYN began managing the Restorative Center in 2016, the center’s focus has shifted from a punitive placement site to a restorative experience. Students reflect on the behaviors that led to suspension and feel supported in making changes so that they can grow personally and become ready for academic learning.

**Supportive staffing model.** The Restorative Center’s service model reflects key aspects of the Newark OYN model. A small physical environment and staffing structure fosters the development of close, positive relationships between students and caring adults. Newark OYN transition liaisons are assigned to follow students through the district’s suspension hearing process. At the Restorative Center, teams of Newark OYN advocate counselors and academic interventionists work with students to help them reflect on their decisions and behaviors that resulted in their suspension and to achieve three aims: demonstrate growth toward personal goals, engage in academic instruction, and complete a restorative project related to the reason they were suspended. To accomplish this, all youth participate in restorative practices including morning meetings, intensive independent counseling, and daily therapeutic groups. Each student also completes at least one personal reflection exercise directly tied to areas of growth revealed in counseling. Students use a daily tracking tool to assess and measure their personal growth and to begin to self-regulate their behavior. Newark OYN academic interventionists provide instructional support to students, but teachers from students’ home schools are responsible for providing assignments and grading completed work. The Restorative Center also works to engage family members in program activities.

**Guidance for future placement.** Youth stay at the Restorative Center for an average of 15 days. The majority of students return to their home school, but about 30 percent transfer to another school setting such as an NPS comprehensive (or traditional) high school or UPLIFT Academy.<sup>18</sup> As students leave the Restorative Center, Newark OYN provides their placement site with a report that includes recommended interventions to help the student mitigate or de-escalate negative behavior. Mentoring is recommended for most students to connect them to a caring adult within their school or in the broader community.

*“At the Restorative Center, adults care about kids. We underestimate the power that has. Several years ago, we would have likely lost these students.”—De’Anna Bond, Newark OYN’s director of program and supports*

## *Meet Danya, 17, Newark OYN Student at the Restorative Center*

***My first reaction.*** I went to the Restorative Center because I had an extended suspension for a month or so. At my old school, I had one friend and that's where a lot of my problems came from. Now I know that the crowd you keep is going to inform how you are as a person and who you are going to become. Attitude was a problem for me because I had a lot of drama with groups of females who didn't like me. My first reaction was to fight instead of me finding a better route to deal with it. The school just brushed it off to the side until it became a bigger problem—basically, students would have drama, the school would wait until there was a fight, break it up, suspend you, and then you were sent home and that was that.

***The chance to change.*** The Restorative Center is a chance to go to a new environment that will help you change as a person. If you have an issue, they help you attack the issue at the root and terminate it, so you can fix yourself. It was a better experience for me, because they focused on me as a person to help me become a better person, to get back on track, and change my attitude. The first time I did morning meeting at the Restorative Center, I wondered why they did this and what's the point. Once I started to get the hang of it, I realized they ask you to name your feelings so they would know how you feel and figure out what they can do to help you feel better. Or, what's going on that you need someone to talk with. I did counseling with [advocate counselor] Ms. B., and she took the time to listen to what I was going through. Every time I talked with Ms. B., she pointed out things I needed to work on as a person, like my attitude, and reminded me that that was why I was at the Restorative Center. She helped me by telling me certain ways to handle issues and situations to prevent it from being a bigger situation. I wish that when all schools see that a student has an issue, they would pull that person off to the side and talk to them to see what's going on and where they can help.



Photo courtesy Newark OYN

## NPS discipline policy

During the 2016–17 school year, Newark OYN convened a school discipline workgroup consisting of both students and representatives of key institutions such as Newark OYN’s partner organizations, local churches, the NAACP, Rutgers Law School, New Jersey’s Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, and the American Civil Liberties Union. The group aimed to analyze and make recommendations for discipline policies and practices at Newark Public Schools (NPS). Data showed that students who eventually left the district’s schools had experienced a disproportionately high rate of suspensions, expulsions, and arrests while in school. This insight, along with those gained through student and stakeholder focus groups, formed the foundation for proposed changes to the district discipline policy to reduce the rate of students leaving school permanently. Based on the workgroup’s recommendations, the NPS school board ratified a new discipline policy in August 2017 that went into effect in the 2017–18 academic year. NPS also provided training to educators and school leaders on the new policy.

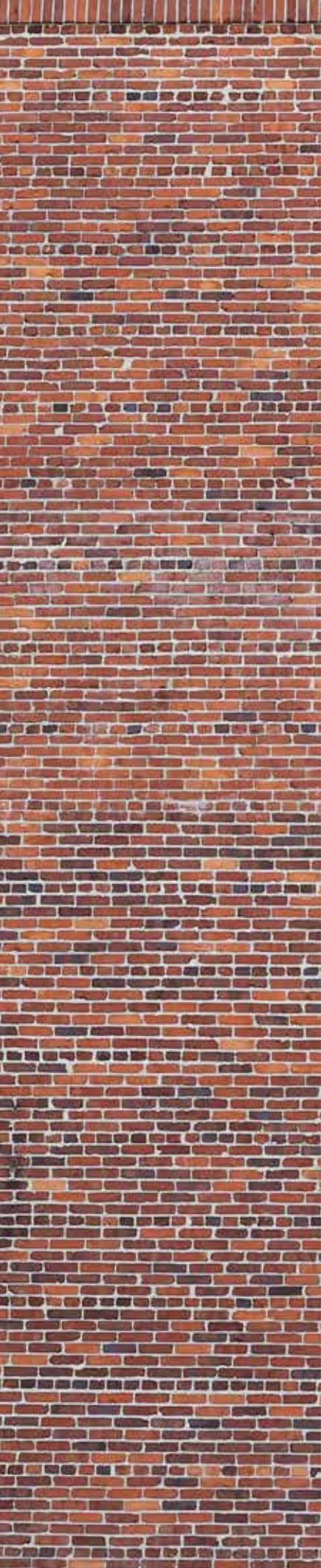
Key changes to the NPS discipline policy included:

- \* Incorporating use of restorative practices, including peer mediation and restorative circles, to promote students and adults taking responsibility for their actions and learning pro-social behaviors to repair harms.
- \* Capping at 25 the total number of suspension days a student may receive in a school year.
- \* Providing students with due process that includes a hearing before the superintendent on a final suspension decision that is consistent with the new policy.
- \* Requiring the district to disaggregate school-level discipline data by race/ethnicity.
- \* Providing additional oversight for special education services to ensure that federal due process requirements are met before long-term suspensions can be implemented.

Though Newark OYN does not have formal monitoring responsibilities, it is observing implementation of the new discipline policy for students that go through the hearing process. To date, Newark OYN staff have attended all superintendent hearings and overseen students’ transitions to the Restorative Center, the district’s long-term suspension center. In the years ahead, Newark OYN is planning more to help ensure equitable implementation of the policy among all NPS schools, including an analysis of disaggregated data (when available) and professional development for NPS staff.

*“Including youth voices in decision making and policy making is something Newark OYN does really well. Youth voice matters in the way we think about solutions, and it’s this engagement that helps young people to tell their stories and think about solutions.”*

—Khaatim Sherrer  
El, My Brother’s  
Keeper Newark’s  
managing director



## LEAD CHARTER SCHOOL: A DIFFERENT SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

LEAD Charter School opened in 2017–18 in Newark’s Central Ward, the location of some of the city’s most poverty-stricken neighborhoods. The state’s first alternative charter school, LEAD offers a non-traditional learning environment designed to serve disconnected youth between the ages of 16 and 21 years old. LEAD addresses several critical OYN objectives.

First, LEAD increases the number of “high-quality education seats”—individual placement spots in alternative schools, charter schools, and programs providing high school or equivalent degrees—designed specifically for disconnected youth. Second, as one of only two schools in the city serving over-age and under-credited youth, LEAD demonstrates how district-run schools can and should better serve at-risk students. Further, LEAD generates a new stream of public funding to support high-quality seats specifically for disconnected youth where none previously existed.

**A different school experience.** LEAD Charter School is intentionally designed to be different from the traditional education settings that did not work for many of its students—and to align with OYN’s vision, principles, and values. LEAD creates a welcoming and engaging environment that encourages youth readiness for learning. Rather than assigning grade levels, LEAD students are grouped by cohort based on credit attainment and approximately when they will age out of compulsory public education. To address each student’s individual needs, LEAD employs a personalized learning approach that includes social and emotional supports as well as restorative practices incorporated into the daily schedule. Personalized and blended learning (a mix of in-person and online instruction) supported by one-on-one and small-group instruction with teachers enables LEAD students to learn at their own pace. Learning is accelerated through frequent assessments throughout the year, and Summit Learning’s online instruction platform.

LEAD uses the Summit program for students’ self-directed, personalized learning time, during which teachers are available for support while students learn online on a platform that adapts to their level of content mastery. LEAD students also have individual development plans that outline their personalized academic course, cognitive skill development objectives, and personal and post-secondary goals. Each student’s plan is continually updated to help them set goals and to provide educators with details regarding effective supports for each student.

LEAD’s focus on youth leadership development and student ownership of their own academic progress stems from Newark OYN values and is manifested in other aspects of the school’s model. For example, LEAD incorporates restorative practices<sup>19</sup> into the school’s daily schedule to encourage student agency, providing opportunities for students to hear and be heard in constructive, safe ways. By giving students this platform to voice their feelings and communicate concerns, LEAD promotes student engagement, leadership, and personal safety. In a student climate survey administered in fall 2017, most students reported that they “almost never” worry about violence in the school. Notably, LEAD has achieved this safe environment without the use of suspensions or expulsions.

**Youth voice in decision making.** LEAD also engages students in some school-level decisions. At weekly “town hall” meetings, school leaders share data with students highlighting what youth have accomplished both academically and personally. During this time, students are asked to share feedback with LEAD’s staff, leading into discussions intended to address problems collectively. Most notably, LEAD and Newark OYN leaders involve students in the selection of LEAD’s staff. Once school leaders have conducted initial screenings of teacher candidates to gauge fit with school culture, students engage in an intensive interview process. They participate in a demonstration lesson led by the candidate, observe a role-play, serve on the candidate’s panel interview asking questions alongside Newark OYN and LEAD leaders, and participate in interview debriefings.

**Access to high-quality teachers.** In hiring teachers, LEAD recruits qualified content experts with strong instructional skills who can also emotionally support and connect with students. Students observe that the quality of teaching at LEAD is much higher than they had at other schools. Many of LEAD’s teachers previously taught in high-performing charter schools but sought to teach students who needed the most help in a way that served them best. One LEAD educator reflected, “Coming from other high-performing charter schools serving students across Newark and New York City, initially, I was shocked to see how underserved the students at LEAD are when they come to us. It’s the driving force for me to help students lift themselves up. I now know I am making an impact on their lives, academically and socially.” Many of LEAD’s students had not previously received the education they deserve or need. One LEAD student said that at LEAD, the teachers do something he never experienced before: “They actually know their stuff and help us when we don’t understand.”

**Staffing model promotes relationship building.** LEAD takes other innovative approaches to staffing. It has two school co-directors, one overseeing school culture and climate and the other academic instruction. Both roles are considered equally important. LEAD also employs a school nurse as well as advocate counselors who provide emotional support and other services beyond those typically provided by guidance counselors in traditional district schools. Each student is assigned an advocate counselor—a trained social worker and mental health professional—with whom they meet twice a month year-round, including summer. They may meet even more often, depending on students’ needs. Advocate counselors become the consistent and caring adult many LEAD students need in their lives but do not have. At initial meetings, advocate counselors work with students to identify the student’s short- and long-term goals. That counseling helps students open up, often enabling them to address traumatic life experiences, LEAD’s leaders say. Advocate counselors also help monitor and encourage attendance by checking student absences each morning, investigating the underlying reasons, and determining whether students need help addressing those circumstances. Advocate counselors report that absent students frequently respond to their messages or come to school later in the day, knowing that their advocate counselors are acting out of concern rather than punishing them. In keeping with the Newark OYN philosophy on relationship-building, LEAD encourages students to continue meeting with their advocate counselors even after graduation for as long as they desire.

*“We know our students are growing and developing when they can be vulnerable. It takes a long time for students to begin to trust and open up.”*  
—Newark OYN  
advocate counselor

## ***Meet Narciso, 20, LEAD Charter School graduate***

***LEAD is different.*** At LEAD, I didn't have to worry about anyone targeting me because of my age like they did at my previous school with jokes from the students and teachers. They made me feel comfortable, even from the beginning when they invited me to a cookout to learn about the school. During our orientation, all the students at LEAD came together because we realized we aren't that different from each other and it's better to work together. At the beginning when we got to the LEAD building, we realized there were no metal detectors, and nobody was fighting. Every other school has metal detectors, police, and all that. We started to think about how we were all the students everybody kicked out of schools, but then we come to LEAD and nobody ended up fighting. Honestly, when we got here everyone wanted love, and that is something we didn't get growing up. Personally, I lived in foster homes and had to think on my own and choose right from wrong. You get real confused outside on the streets. The fact that a lot of people didn't have this at all—at LEAD they showed us a different lifestyle.

***Opening up.*** I definitely learned at LEAD, but more about myself than straight academics. When people think school they think books, grades, tests, pencils, pens, but nobody thinks about the growth you really need as an adult or life in general. I couldn't learn from books when I was going through a life situation. Before I got to LEAD, I was bitter and didn't care about much because life was so hard for me and everything was coming at once. The struggle was getting harder and harder. For me, the hardest thing was to open up because I felt so abused through life. Sometimes I'd think to myself that if I stayed to myself, bad things wouldn't have happened. Now I realize that if I would have opened up a lot sooner, I would have been in a better position than I am now, but that took a while.

***Caring staff.*** The staff at LEAD give their lives to help all the students at LEAD. They show us love. They took us to the doctor to get shots so we have what we need to go to school. As kids, we don't go to the doctor unless someone is forcing us, and some of us don't have parents. Stuff like this helped me open up because they showed us love and caring. I've grown at LEAD because I open up more. I'm not so bottled up. My fists aren't balled up. The staff at LEAD cracked my shell. Now when something bothers me, I have to get it out instead of holding onto it like I used to. I also can talk to people now, and they helped me with this. I was in student council when I was at LEAD. The staff wanted me to do it and try it. I had to give a speech in front of the class. Now I can talk in front of people without a problem; I can pick up a mic.

***Planning for my future.*** I continued to go to LEAD even in the dark days. I walked up the hill even in the snow just to come to school. Just coming to LEAD, good stuff started happening. LEAD helped me with my job after a teacher took me last year when [Shaquille O'Neal] came to open up a building in Newark.<sup>1</sup> [My teacher] Mr. L. took his best construction students, and I got to meet Shaq and the mayor. I now work in the engineering department at city hall. I give credit to LEAD because if Mr. L. had never taken me on that trip, I wouldn't have run into the mayor, and I wouldn't have had my job. I didn't know what to do with myself after graduation, and LEAD helped me see that I can go to college, and that's where I am now. No other school that I went to helped me think about or plan my future. No school can honestly say they can change someone's life like LEAD can—they made me want to be a better person.

1. Shaquille O'Neal, a former NBA player who grew up in Newark, is financing a new 22-story luxury apartment complex in downtown Newark scheduled to open by the end of 2018. He was in Newark in April 2018 to mark the completion of the building's top floor. Hill, M. (2018, April 10). "Shaq Tower" in downtown Newark marks a milestone. *NJTV News*. Retrieved from <https://www.njtonline.org/news/video/shaq-tower-downtown-newark-marks-milestone/>; Yi, K. (2018, April 11). Shaq is opening a \$79M apartment tower in N.J. *NJ.com*. Retrieved from [https://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2018/04/shaquille\\_oneal\\_newark\\_development\\_one\\_rector\\_stre.html](https://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2018/04/shaquille_oneal_newark_development_one_rector_stre.html)

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**LEAD**  
CHARTER SCHOOL



NEW COMMUNITY

201



# LEAD CHARTER SCHOOL: CULTIVATING CONDITIONS THAT ENGAGE DISCONNECTED YOUTH IN LEARNING

**S**tudents at LEAD Charter School find the school to be radically different from traditional schools. Inspired by the Newark OYN vision and values, LEAD reflects the shared belief among Newark OYN partners that all youth can achieve their potential when they have the necessary conditions in place to learn, meaningful relationships with people who care, and opportunities to lead.

***Serving students most in need.*** Students at LEAD have intense and profound needs. Most of them have had previous negative academic experiences and were either disengaged from school or at risk of disengaging from school when they came to LEAD. In the 2017–18 school year, all of LEAD’s students are youth of color, most of whom are economically disadvantaged. Nearly all are academically at risk—they are either over-age and under-credited or have at least one risk factor for disengagement.<sup>1</sup> According to Newark OYN, an estimated 50 percent or more are affiliated with gang activity; 15 percent are homeless; 10 percent are involved in the juvenile justice system; and 3 percent live in a foster setting. Almost 20 percent of students at LEAD have identified disabilities,<sup>2</sup> higher than the rate at Newark Public Schools (15 percent) and the city’s charter sector (9.3 percent).<sup>3</sup> Academically, LEAD’s first class of students started the 2017–18 school year about five to seven grade levels behind. Based on results from the NWEA MAP test, students’ incoming average reading and math scores were about at fifth-grade level.<sup>4</sup>

***Growing as people.*** Despite these challenges, LEAD’s staff strongly believe in their students’ potential to grow academically and emotionally. “Students transform at LEAD. Seeing students move from complete defiance in the early phase to asking for help, showing interest, and demonstrating trust—it’s huge,” one LEAD educator said. Students appreciate that their teachers and the school staff believe in them. “Mr. Price [Darrell Price, LEAD’s director of student support services] reminded me that some stuff I went through, other people would not have been able to handle,” said a 2018 graduate of LEAD’s inaugural class. “After that, I started to open up more because Mr. Price showed he listened to me and cared about me. When I was upset, I would come to school because I felt better when I left.”

1. Reported by OYN’s Executive Director of Finance and Operations, Dr. Dwayne Davis, on July 16, 2018.

2. Reported by Newark OYN, Dr. Dwayne Davis, on July 16, 2018.

3. Advocates for Children of New Jersey. (2017). *Kids Count Newark 2017: A city profile of child well-being*. Newark, NJ: Author. Retrieved from [https://acnj.org/downloads/2017\\_03\\_16\\_Kids\\_Count\\_Newark.pdf](https://acnj.org/downloads/2017_03_16_Kids_Count_Newark.pdf)

4. Reported by OYN, Dr. Dwayne Davis, on July 16, 2018.



***Experiencing a different kind of space.*** Student transformation starts when students walk through the doors. Inside LEAD, the building doesn't feel, look, or sound like a school—it's even referred to as being "in space." According to LEAD students, the most obvious difference from their former schools upon first entering the building is the absence of metal detectors, police, and student fights. Instead, the first thing students see is a welcome desk with the motivational statement, "Trust the Process"—emblazoned above it. The walls are painted by a local artist to resemble street art, and there are professional, artistic photos of OYN's youth participants—drawing their inner beauty and strength out for all to see. The halls are filled with a meditative, rhythmic beat of music. The building itself conjures a warm feeling: One student says it is "like grandma's house" and drastically more comfortable than any other school she's ever been in.

The building is open beyond normal school hours to provide a safe space for students. During winter break, LEAD is open for students who can't be around their families for one reason or another, and sometimes students gather there to spend the holidays together. "At LEAD, it's my job for the building to be set up for students to feel welcome and heard. The building looks the way it does to engender trust and make young people feel welcome. Students get a say in how the building looks, and this plays a major role in creating trust," Price said.

***Trusting relationships with caring adults.*** At LEAD, advocate counselors play a big role in helping students open up and engage. "I can tell my advocate counselor everything," a student said. "When we talk, it's all about me, what is going on in my life, and what I can do to plan for my goals. My guidance counselor at other schools didn't do that." According to LEAD staff, they can identify exactly when students begin their transformation. "It's when the student starts to be vulnerable and tell their truths that we start to see improvement in academic scores," Price said. "Ups and downs are inherent to the development process at LEAD. We see change occurring within students as they tell us their stories, shift their mindsets to be more positive and reflective, then engage in truth-telling. Their end goal is a career credential, but it's so much more in the short term, whether discontinuing drug use or gaining an internship."

***Empowering youth to lead.*** Consistent with Newark OYN values, LEAD staff members shift decision-making power to youth so they have opportunities to lead. This release of control is something they typically have not experienced in school



before. It enables students to take the initiative. “I’ve never really been listened to or taken seriously in school. Now I am,” one LEAD student said. LEAD staff have found various ways to entrust students with important decisions. During one weekly town hall meeting, a student shared that he found the school’s rules to be “too much like how adults speak” and wanted them to be written by the students themselves. The school’s staff agreed and coordinated the structure and time for this student and others to revise LEAD’s school rules to be written from the student perspective.

LEAD students are also involved in assessing teacher candidates (see “LEAD Charter School: A different school experience,” page 30). Students participate in candidate-led demonstration lessons, role play, and interviews, and before a hiring decision is made, students are asked their opinion about the candidate’s fit for the position and with LEAD. That helps both with staff selection and in developing students’ job interview skills. “Nobody had ever given me feedback on my interview, and I had never given that feedback to an adult before, and that was a fun and different experience for me,” one student said. Another student said, “They really do care what we think about staff. It makes a lot of sense to ask the students, but no other school ever did that before.” No candidate so far has been hired over a student’s objection. “Engaging students in staff hiring decisions has never failed us. I don’t think it ever will,” says Mark Comesañas, Newark OYN’s executive director of programs and instruction.

***Restoring oneself in community.*** LEAD staff report that their comfort with shifting control toward students is rooted in the relationships they have developed with them and the community they cultivate using restorative practices. “Participating in the rituals creates a community approach; it demonstrates community and humility,” Comesañas said. For example, every morning, everyone at LEAD—students, educators, advocate counselors, and directors—meets in a circle to recite the Newark OYN philosophy in unison. The circle—in which all are viewed as equals—is meant to highlight the supports a student may need throughout the day. Each person is asked to state their name and how they are feeling. LEAD’s staff and fellow students look for problems that may leak into the classroom and address them immediately. Students also shout out positive affirmations of each other or staff and use the circle time to share ideas on how LEAD could be better. During this time, a student once took the opportunity to highlight that students should recite their own poetry written in English class. “It just made sense that we were doing all this work, and we needed to celebrate it. I learned so much about the other students from hearing their poetry—it made me see what they were going through. I could help them better because of it,” she said.

## Community-Based Organizations

Across Newark, well-established community-based organizations (CBOs) have worked for decades to improve the lives of economically marginalized residents who lack access to critical resources. These organizations have cultivated deep trust from members of their community—many of whom are disconnected youth—who see them as anchors, or safe spaces to go for help. CBOs help residents by connecting them to critical services, resources, and opportunities in health care, housing, employment, and more. They also often advocate for improved policy conditions and better coordinated social services. Given their longstanding community presence, records of service, and belief in the value of all people, Newark OYN recognized that these local organizations could offer high-quality educational options outside of formal school settings.

Newark OYN originally selected four CBOs with a track record of success offering wraparound services to address residents' holistic needs. At the end of the network's first year, two of those organizations had programs that were programmatically aligned with the Newark OYN model to continue as formally affiliated partner programs.

**La Casa de Don Pedro (La Casa)** is Newark's primary nonprofit link to the city's Hispanic and Latino communities. It provides social services such as education, youth enrichment, health care, housing, and workforce development. As a result of its partnership with Newark OYN, La Casa has added classes that lead to a high school diploma or equivalency.

**New Community Corporation (NCC)** is a comprehensive community development organization that offers a range of social services including housing access, child care, preschool programs, and an expansive workforce development center that provides accredited, industry-recognized post-secondary programs in automotive mechanics, health care, building trades, and culinary arts. Partnering with OYN allowed NCC to expand its educational programs to high schoolers.

### COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS BENEFIT FROM PARTNERSHIP

By partnering with CBOs, Newark OYN expands the number of high-quality educational options it can offer to disconnected youth as well as its ability to address their needs holistically. CBOs also receive significant benefits from their participation in the network. Newark OYN's support enables CBOs to offer credit-bearing, high school equivalency courses taught by certified teachers to over-age and under-credited youth. CBOs also have the opportunity to connect, learn, and collaborate with other partners serving youth, rather than working in isolation toward the same goals. CBOs participate in network meetings, professional development, technical assistance opportunities, and more. Professionals and educators from across the network tap into these opportunities to discuss how to best serve disconnected youth within their organizations and collectively.

**Shared language.** Newark OYN's coordination establishes a common approach to recognize disconnected youth and their needs through a new, shared language. This language informs practices to address the needs of disengaged youth and

promotes a common message to youth that these organizations are available to help them.

“Prior to partnering with Newark OYN, disconnected youth were a group we had not worked with directly at NCC,” said NCC CEO Richard Rohrman. “We had early child care, a charter school basketball league, and all kinds of initiatives for children in the system, but nothing specifically for youth outside the system. This should have been obvious, but it wasn’t. Newark OYN helps us talk more about these young people, so we can do something for them and get the message out that our door is open to them.”

**Increased visibility.** Community-based organizations also benefit from OYN’s citywide scale and ability to connect youth who were previously outside of the system to their services. Newark OYN’s widespread community recognition helps direct youth clients to programs, with referrals coming through the REC, a one-stop shop for intake, assessment, and referrals.

“The REC’s presence in Newark lets young people know there is a place they can go to receive services if they are not engaged in school,” said Rodney Brutton, NCC’s director of workforce development. An anchor in the community, NCC is widely known for its housing, but not as much for educational and postsecondary services. CBOs’ connection to the REC helps them “see” the youth who are out of the system and introduces youth to the educational services that they provide, in addition to the holistic, nonacademic supports they need to help them get back on track.

**Access to referrals.** Because the REC’s intake and assessment process uses a shared language, CBOs have a common understanding of the criteria the REC uses (such as academic credit totals, age, and the youth’s preferences for placement) to determine which network-affiliated program would be the best educational setting. Since they receive assessment information immediately upon referral, CBOs can begin to build relationships with youth and work with them to plan their program engagement at the first point of contact.

**Financial support.** Newark OYN directs financial support to CBOs that has enabled them to collaborate rather than compete for finite resources as they reach and support disconnected youth. With OYN consolidating a funding stream to support this specific population, CBOs now report having the openness needed to share practices and collaborate rather than work in isolation. “Now, we are all in this together,” Brutton said. “Newark OYN’s allocation of funding eliminates competition and territorialism over local funding sources.”

**Technical assistance and professional development.** Newark OYN staff members coordinate and deliver technical assistance support to CBOs. To help carry this out, Newark Public Schools dedicates two district employees to work within the OYN leadership team to monitor and ensure quality of CBO-run OYN programs. They report to OYN monthly on CBOs’ strengths and challenges, including performance against their work plan and organizational goals. Drawing from conversations with youth clients, staff interviews, case file reviews, and more, the reports include recommendations for improving organizational capacities or implementation of the OYN model.

Newark OYN builds on existing strengths of partner programs and aims to increase their capacity to address the needs of disconnected youth in alignment with

the Newark OYN model. For example, Newark OYN’s technical assistance helped NCC expand service to disconnected youth between the ages of 16 and 19 when they previously offered educational programs for adults only. NCC and its newly hired certified teachers benefit from the network’s technical assistance specific to the social, emotional, and developmental needs of youth who have experienced trauma as well as the individual support needed when teaching students with a wide range of academic needs.

Reinforced by Newark OYN’s technical assistance and guided by cross-network professional development, certified teachers at CBOs and schools across the network implement programs and services aligned with Newark OYN vision and values. Specifically, Newark OYN develops educators’ ability to build relationships and address students’ emotional needs—making them feel welcome, appropriately challenged, and encouraged to overcome obstacles. The network’s professional development is particularly valuable to educators at CBOs, who are often one of few education staff at their site, as it creates an opportunity for them to engage with a broader community of professionals working with similar students and to learn and share helpful practices.

**High expectations.** Newark OYN also works with CBOs to set performance benchmarks for participant enrollment, academic progress, rate of graduation or high school equivalency attainment, post-secondary education and completion, and post-secondary employment to ensure accountability and lay the groundwork for future funding and development opportunities. For example, Newark OYN intentionally set CBO benchmarks to federally funded program benchmarks to position them to be eligible for future federal funding opportunities, such as grants under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.<sup>20</sup>

The establishment of clear and ambitious expectations for partners’ performance also helps ensure accountability. Newark OYN implemented a common data system for network partners to track performance against benchmarks. Quarterly reports allow network-affiliated CBOs to understand their progress. Before joining Newark OYN, CBOs were not systematically tracking these common measures. As part of a collective, they are held to new standards that reflect the investment Newark OYN and its partners have made. By capturing and reviewing data across the network, Newark OYN’s CBO partners have started to consider success for all CBOs combined, rather than just for their individual program. CBOs that are not able to sustain performance at these high levels risk their formal partnership with Newark OYN, including the funding that Newark Public Schools and foundations provide.

*“La Casa’s work with Newark OYN gives us the opportunity to meet students where they are and the flexibility to design programs based on what we know works best.”*—Wendy Melendez, La Casa de Don Pedro’s division director of personal development

# NEW COMMUNITY CORPORATION MEETS DISCONNECTED YOUTHS' NEEDS HOLISTICALLY



**N**ewark OYN expands its ability to provide a wide range of services beyond academics through its partnership with community-based organizations (CBOs). One such organization, New Community Corporation (NCC), a longtime Newark comprehensive community development organization, offers services people need to live healthy and productive lives. Best known to the community for its housing assistance, NCC also offers accredited early childhood education, child care, and postsecondary programs, as well as senior care, health care, credit counseling, and more. Many youth engaged in Newark OYN educational programming at NCC or at other network partners use these services, especially child care. NCC also helps its youth clients receive free meals at its culinary arts center, and guides youth seamlessly from its high school diploma/equivalency program to its accredited post-secondary programs with minimal or zero student costs.<sup>21</sup>

To prepare students for these postsecondary programs, NCC's workforce development center provides students with real-life, on-the-job training, entry-level job placement assistance, financial literacy, and on-site career counseling. Newark OYN sees the ability of CBOs to provide services that comprehensively meet previously unmet needs as a key factor for reengaging opportunity youth. That their programs look and feel different from traditional schools also helps disconnected youth reset from any past negative school experiences. For example, NCC's buildings feel more like a busy village of interconnected parts—its campus includes housing and an automotive center near a car shop—rather than a traditional school building. Beyond the nontraditional setting, youth engaged in NCC's educational programs also benefit from their teachers' ability to connect to their emotional needs, so that they feel encouraged to set and achieve their personal, academic, and career goals despite the challenges they previously faced in life or in traditional school.



## ***Meet Faith, 19, Newark OYN Student at New Community Corporation (NCC)***

I moved to Newark from Jamaica to live with my aunt. My mom lives in D.C. I would have been a sophomore in a regular school, but older than everyone.

***Encouragement to plan and achieve goals.*** My teacher, Ms. P., has pushed me toward my goals. She helped me focus on what I don't know in my subjects. She tested me and gave me extra practice to make sure I'm reaching my goal. She encouraged me. She told me to believe in myself. When I failed, she comforted me. At first, I passed two tests and failed three so I was down. She told me not to pressure myself and that if I took them again I would pass. She embraced me and built me up and is like a mother to me and the other students. After being at NCC, I'm not scared to go out there and try new things. All the teachers tell you as long as you believe in yourself, no matter how hard it will be, you can do it and it will happen. If I went to a regular school, I wouldn't have gotten the push. I would have been confused, exhausted, and worried because I wouldn't have gotten much attention since there are a lot of distractions and just one teacher to a big class. When you come to NCC, the teacher really works with you. If you are talking in class and acting a certain way, they do discipline you, but they step you outside the room to talk and find out what is happening, and then take you back to class. They give you attention without you having to seek it; they pay attention to everyone and know everyone's name by heart. They treat everyone equal—nobody judges you at NCC.

***Supportive services beyond academics.*** It's more than just learning at NCC. To start the day, we have morning meeting, and the teachers ask you how you feel, how is your day, have you had breakfast. If you haven't eaten, they get you tea. We get free lunch every day. They give us bus tickets, so we can go to school and go home. If you have problems with debt, there are financial people to help you try to figure this out and how to pay for things every month. If you don't live anywhere, they put you in the NCC building. They help you find a place to stay and stay out of trouble. They communicate with your parents to check on you. Even if you don't come in one day, they call you to see if you are OK. There was an accident with someone in my class—he was on a scooter and a car hit him. He called the teacher and she went to the hospital to check on him. They will stay with you to figure things out—sometimes after 4 or 5 o'clock—to help you study and do extra work. The teachers here are amazing.

# NEWARK'S OPPORTUNITY AND JOBS SUMMIT 2018



In February 2018, My Brother's Keeper (MBK) Newark hosted an Opportunity and Jobs Summit in downtown Newark to help young people of color prepare to enter the job market and connect them to potential employers. The summit featured local employers conducting interviews for on-the-spot hiring, as well as community organizations holding leadership development and career preparation sessions. Topics included workplace professionalism, personal presentation and interviewing skills, developing a resume, and career planning. In total, 175 young men and women from OYN-affiliated programs attended the all-day event. By the end of the day, 51 OYN participants received job offers, and dozens of others had second interviews.

To prepare Newark OYN students for the summit, OYN required attendance at a series of six workshops previewing relevant topics and engaging youth in mock interviews. Staff also arranged haircuts, purchased button-down shirts, and provided resume folders—all in an effort to show students how to be properly prepared for such an opportunity.

MBK Newark and Newark OYN hope to build on the summit's momentum by planning a broader strategy that connects youth in OYN education and workforce development programs to employment opportunities.

## Community Partners

In addition to establishing high-quality education and workforce development options for disconnected youth, Newark OYN's broader strategy recognizes the need to address out-of-school factors that contribute to youth disengagement. Accordingly, Newark OYN includes community organizations that provide supports or empower youth to address out-of-school challenges. Like community-based organization (CBO) partners, the network's affiliated community partners are well-established organizations that have long served and advocated for those most in need. But whereas Newark OYN cultivates CBO partners that provide education and workforce development programs and ancillary supports to disconnected youth, Newark OYN's community partners have come to the network with systems and programs in place to address specific issues that affect disconnected youth such as access to health care, repaired relationships with community police, and support for youth who transition out of the juvenile justice system.

### HEALTH CARE

Access to preventive health care is among the most significant challenges facing opportunity youth. Unfortunately, many Newark OYN students rely on emergency rooms for primary health care, are teen parents, or have health concerns that go untreated—all with significant education, social, and financial consequences. Given that health and wellness is as an indicator of positive outcomes, Newark OYN works with Rutgers New Jersey Medical School's Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine Clinic to introduce students at LEAD Charter School and UPLIFT Academy to the concept of preventive health care. The partnership is intended to develop a culture of wellness at those schools, introduce LEAD and UPLIFT students to the clinic as a primary health care option, and empower them to navigate health care and insurance systems. Through these efforts, Newark OYN and the clinic hope to decrease students' at-risk behaviors, decrease the teen pregnancy rate, increase students' knowledge of basic health topics, and increase the number of students who receive health care services at the clinic.

**Access to preventive and primary health care.** Since May 2018, Newark OYN has contracted with the clinic for an advanced practice nurse to serve students attending LEAD Charter School and UPLIFT Academy by delivering wellness information, providing clinical services, and making referrals to providers. This nurse spends one day a week at each of the two schools, providing minor medical services that school nurses are not authorized to deliver, including screening for diseases, and working closely with the school nurse—who cannot make referrals to providers but is frequently the first screen for students' health need—to identify students for referrals to the clinic. Once a month, the nurse presents information to the entire student body on topics such as general adolescent health, sexual and reproductive health, mental health, and substance abuse.

Generally, clinic referrals pertain to reproductive health, mental health, and basic medical care, including annual physicals and immunizations required to enroll in school. Upon referral, clinic staff work with each student to navigate their health insurance options.

*“Newark OYN gives youth a place to have a conversation about how to put their lives back on track. Many of these youth do not have adults or parents they can talk to let alone connect them to services. Newark OYN helps fill that gap.”*

—Kelley Rooney,  
Rutgers New Jersey  
Medical School's  
Division of Adolescent and Young  
Adult Medicine  
administrator

*“Newark OYN is deeply connected to the youth it serves. Our partnership with Newark OYN means actual youth voice informs our work on issues that affect them.”*

—Ryan Haygood, New Jersey Institute for Social Justice’s chief executive officer

“For many Newark OYN students, the clinic service provides an option for them to receive health care if they do not have a medical home, health insurance, or otherwise do not have adult caregivers or supporters who can help them access health services,” said Kelley Rooney, administrator of the Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine, Rutgers New Jersey Medical School. Helping Newark OYN youth navigate the system has the potential to improve community public health outcomes and reduce costs. According to Rooney, many youth tell their family and friends about the clinic and bring them in for much-needed preventive care and treatment.

## **JUVENILE JUSTICE**

An estimated quarter of Newark’s disconnected youth are or have been involved in the juvenile justice system. Newark OYN’s partnerships in juvenile justice focus on reducing negative police encounters, advocating for the development of policing policies that positively affect youth, and enhancing opportunities for effective community-based rehabilitation.

**Youth voice in policy development.** Newark OYN works with the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, a Newark nonprofit focused on criminal justice reform and improving economic mobility of and civic engagement among New Jersey’s urban residents. Newark OYN youth participate in the institute’s efforts to address juvenile incarceration policies that have disproportionately affected youth of color throughout the state. The institute specifically engages participants from Newark OYN programs, including YouthBuild Newark and LEAD Charter School, to support its youth justice advocacy campaign to end youth incarceration in New Jersey.

Newark OYN students also participate in efforts to redress Newark Police Department community policing policies that have disproportionately violated the civil rights of people of color in Newark. In response to a 2016 federal consent decree,<sup>22</sup> the Newark Police Department is required to implement comprehensive reforms in 12 substantive areas to address police practices that the U.S. Department of Justice found unconstitutional. As a member of the independent monitoring team for these reforms, the institute convened youth policy forums with Newark OYN youth—primarily young men of color between the ages of 18 and 21—and law enforcement representatives to discuss police practices related to the use of force, police misconduct and discipline, investigatory stops and searches, arrests, and more. Through facilitated discussions, youth are providing input for the development of policies intended to improve youth interactions with law enforcement officers.

Though the full impact of the institute’s work on these issues will become evident over time, Newark OYN youth have been empowered through their engagement in the process. “Young people appreciate the chance to be included in this work. They are gaining important life skills for themselves,” said Ryan Haygood, the institute’s CEO. In addition to speaking out on issues that directly affect disconnected youth, Newark OYN youth participating in the institute’s initiatives gain leadership skills. The young people participating in the youth justice advocacy campaign support communications and advocacy trainings, conduct site visits to youth prisons, and

meet with legislators. And those participating in the youth policy forums develop communication skills to apply in their real-life interactions with police and analytical skills to critically examine and inform the development of equitable policing policies.

**Reengaging juvenile offenders.** Newark OYN is also part of a county-wide multi-disciplinary aftercare planning team (MDT), initially convened by the Rutgers School of Criminal Justice, that coordinates reentry of juvenile offenders transitioning from a secure juvenile detention facility to parole or probation. Many of these youth are over-age and under-credited, whose schooling has been interrupted by their legal troubles. The MDT consists of various representatives from law enforcement, the courts, child protective services, mental health and drug treatment providers, youth-serving organizations, and residential youth programs. They meet monthly to review community-based supervision plans for juvenile offenders returning to their home communities. Newark OYN's participation in these meetings enables the team to identify an appropriate educational reengagement option given a youth's academic credits, age, and other factors.

Prior to Newark OYN's establishment, parole and probation officers would work with parents and caregivers of youth as they left detention facilities to re-enroll them in school in their home district, with mixed results.

"Before Newark OYN existed, 18- to 21-year-old youth released on juvenile probation and parole were not finishing their education for two reasons: First, re-enrollment in their home schools was frequently a challenging process, and sometimes they were not allowed to re-enroll; and second, when young people are over-age and under-credited, they don't want to go back to regular high schools, and since they are 18 they don't have to go to school," said Lori Scott-Pickens, director of community outreach at Rutgers School of Criminal Justice and MDT member. Though Newark OYN does not yet have hard data, anecdotal evidence suggests that its facilitation of educational placements not only expedites reengagement of released juvenile offenders in education, but also increases the likelihood that they will complete programs. "With Newark OYN programs, over-age youth have hope that they can get their high school diploma and relevant job training," said Scott-Pickens.

*"Newark OYN shines a light on a population of over-age and under-credited youth who go unnoticed and therefore have difficulty developing life skills they need to be successful. Newark OYN helps ensure that these young people get the resources they need."*—Lori Scott-Pickens, Rutgers School of Criminal Justice's director of community outreach



# ENGAGING STUDENTS IN DECISION MAKING

I feel like my work as a youth advocate with the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice has benefited me, youth like me, and adults who work with and make decisions for young people. Being involved helped me grow and realize that a lot of people my age need advocates to help them have justice so they can succeed in life. Being a youth advocate gives adults a different perspective and lets them know that youth really do care about the work they are doing and everything around them. It helps everyone realize that youth want to make things better—not just for themselves but everyone who lives in the community.—*Alliah, OYN graduate and youth advocate*

## *Research and Advocacy Partners*

Newark OYN’s strategy includes efforts to increase understanding of the issues that drive youth disconnection and effective responses. Firsthand experience working with opportunity youth informs its advocacy agenda, which focuses on sharing findings with network partners, industry leaders, and other interested parties. Ultimately, Newark OYN hopes to raise awareness, encourage dialogue, and unify collaborative efforts that promote meaningful policy change and implementation of effective solutions.

**Facilitating a citywide conversation.** Rutgers University-Newark has led Newark OYN’s formal research efforts and played a significant role in spurring dialogue and inquiry into the city’s response to disconnected youth. In 2014, the university and Newark Public Schools co-sponsored a “GradNation Summit” as part of a campaign through America’s Promise Alliance to raise the national high school graduation rate to 90 percent. The daylong summit galvanized community leaders to work together to reengage youth who had left or were at risk of leaving school before graduating.

The university has since implemented several network-aligned initiatives. Those include a multi-sector collaborative project based in the Joseph C. Cornwall Center of Metropolitan Studies working to increase post-secondary attainment among Newark residents to 25 percent by 2025, and an initiative with Apple, Inc., that LEAD Charter School is piloting to create a curriculum that prepares secondary students for coding careers. According to the university’s chancellor, Nancy Cantor, “Newark OYN brings the structure needed to tie together all the cutting-edge initiatives that are happening in the city that may benefit the lives of opportunity youth.”

## *Philanthropic Partners*

Newark OYN emerged in 2016 with significant support from Newark’s philanthropic community. Several of the city’s major foundations had supported YouthBuild Newark’s efforts to support disconnected youth (see “Origins and History of Newark OYN,” page 18), and long wrestled with questions and concerns about the city’s divergent efforts to meet their needs.

As partners in the Newark OYN network, foundations provide critical financial support and have helped guide strategic planning. Prudential Financial, the Community Foundation of New Jersey, and the Victoria Foundation were among the initial group that helped establish Newark OYN’s local network of partners. Along with national funders, including the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, local foundations continue to support Newark OYN as it matures into a proven, successful leader in its field.

Prudential Financial, a global financial services company headquartered in Newark since its founding more than 140 years ago, has provided particularly valuable expertise and perspective. With a strong record of support for national and international efforts to boost employer engagement with disconnected youth, Prudential has been a leader in Newark’s opportunity youth issues, including supporting the launch, cultivation, and expansion of YouthBuild Newark. As a partner in the network, Prudential played a leading role in the evolution of Newark OYN and has supported its engagement in a national network of opportunity youth initiatives organized as the Aspen Institute’s Opportunity Youth Forum. The forum has increased Newark OYN leaders’ understanding of collective impact strategies that other leading communities use to support opportunity youth, and Newark OYN’s experiences can influence others’ initiatives (see “Informing the National Landscape,” page 52).



Photo courtesy Newark OYN



## NEWARK OYN'S IMPACT

***I changed for the better.** I'm from Newark. The first high school I attended was like a jail. They treated us like we were prisoners. We were forced to do work, and that's it. They didn't take time to make sure everybody understood one subject before they went to something else. They expected us to just know it. That's why I went to another high school. But, I just ran into a different set of issues. At this school, they allowed the kids to do whatever they want. The teachers didn't know how to control students, so they let them do anything. I was at this high school for two years, but I wasn't really going to school since there wasn't a point. If I went to school, I didn't go to class. I got into a lot of drama with other girls, mainly because I couldn't control my attitude. That's what led me to get suspended for a month. When I realized that I had changed for the better, I didn't go back to the school, because I don't think the school had changed. Now I'm in a school environment at LEAD where the teachers and advocate counselors listen to you and help you find resolution on your issues. They help you grow as a person, which helps you be a better student.—Danya, 17*

**S**ince Newark OYN's emergence in 2016, the organization has grown rapidly and achieved critical early successes. The very existence of Newark OYN, a collaborative network organization, in a city that has experienced its share of divisiveness,<sup>23</sup> reflects an early win. Changed mindsets about disconnected youth and innovative approaches to serving them are evidence of the progress being made toward long-term systemic change. Given its all-encompassing strategy, Newark OYN's success may distinguish it from community-based initiatives working across the country to address the challenges of reengaging disconnected youth.

# NEWARK OYN'S EARLY ACCOMPLISHMENTS, 2016-2018

## YOUTH

- \* Newark OYN programs have conducted intake and assessment for 1,843 youth
    - 782 youth sought high-quality educational options through the Re-Engagement Center in 2017-18
  - \* Newark OYN schools and programs served a total of 371 youth in 2017-18
    - 129 youth at LEAD Charter School
    - 88 youth at UPLIFT Academy
    - 82 youth at community-based organizations
    - 72 youth at the Restorative Center<sup>24</sup>
  - \* 154 students have graduated from Newark OYN programs
  - \* Among 2016-17 graduates, 45 students matriculated to post-secondary education or gained employment
- 

## PROGRAMS

- \* Created over 250 new or redesigned high-quality educational seats for disconnected youth
  - \* Reestablished the Re-Engagement Center using proven youth development strategies to direct disconnected youth to high-quality educational seats
  - \* Turned around UPLIFT Academy, now a model for serving disconnected youth in Newark Public Schools
  - \* Founded and expanded LEAD Charter School, the first alternative charter school in New Jersey; graduated its first class of students at the end of 2017-18, its inaugural academic year 30 of the 32 (or 94 percent) students slated to graduate with an additional four graduating in the summer of 2018
  - \* Established high-quality educational seats in non-traditional settings at community-based organizations for disconnected youth
- 

## SYSTEMS

- \* Provided a mission-driven structure facilitating and supporting cross-network collaboration of partners to implement the Newark OYN model and share learning
- \* Raised expectations for disconnected youth from completing high school to earning a post-secondary credential
- \* Advocated for the Newark Public School discipline policy revision to include restorative approaches
- \* Promoted student agency and elevated disconnected youth voices in policy-making and advocacy

## *Serving Disconnected Youth*

Newark OYN worked with its partners to establish education placement options specifically designed to address the needs of opportunity youth (see “Education Providers,” page 24). Notably, OYN planned and opened the state’s first alternative charter school, LEAD Charter School, and reopened the district’s Re-Engagement Center. In its first two years, OYN served over 500 youth in educational programs, 154 of whom graduated with a high school or equivalent degrees. Other early accomplishments suggest a strong start for each of these programs.

In the 2017–18 school year:

- \* The Re-Engagement Center (REC) served nearly 900 youth—two-thirds of whom were referred from Newark Public Schools—and placed the overwhelming majority (95 percent) in a network-affiliated educational option: UPLIFT Academy (32 percent), LEAD Charter School (24 percent), and Newark OYN community-based programs that award high school or equivalent degrees (39 percent). Primarily youth of color and economically disadvantaged, nearly all REC participants were over-age and academically under-credited. Twenty-five percent reported that they had been arrested at some point.<sup>25</sup>
- \* UPLIFT Academy served 88 students, with 72 percent of students attending school more frequently than they had the previous year.<sup>26</sup>
- \* LEAD Charter School served 129 students. In the spring of 2018, 30 of the 32 students on track to graduate in 2018 attained their degrees from LEAD; the other two graduated in the summer, along with an additional two students expected to graduate in the next academic year. Having exceeded its target enrollment in its inaugural year, LEAD expanded its student enrollment to 240 in the 2018–19 school year and was authorized to serve a maximum of 480 students.
- \* Newark OYN community-based organizations reached well over 100 percent of their target participation rate, enrolling 82 students.

## *Changing Mindsets*

Partners in the network agree that Newark OYN has united them around a common vision for opportunity youth that drives collective and aligned efforts to improve their lives. “With Newark OYN youth programs, they are more conscientiously preparing students to be functional members of society,” said Antoinette Baskerville Richardson, Newark’s chief education officer. OYN principles and program design elements foster a common recognition among partners that disconnected youth are assets rather than problems, which in turn drives urgency to better identify opportunity youth and uniformly and consistently address their needs in settings that work best for them.

## *Meet Faith, 19, Newark OYN Student at New Community Corporation (NCC)*

**Planning for my postsecondary future.** When I came to NCC, I thought I would just get a GED and didn't know what I would do after or where I would work. I was sitting there confused not knowing what I was going to do after I finish high school, and then I talked to [my teacher] Ms. P., and we figured it out. She told me not to worry about that, she said, "We got you." We sat down and planned my goals—where I want to see myself in three months, in a year, and beyond. She told me that to set a goal, you need to know where you want to work and think about jobs where you can get benefits and save. She told me about the types of jobs I could go for or how I could do the NCC nursing program and work at the same time. Now I want to get my high school equivalency in December, then enroll in the nursing postsecondary program at NCC in January, then go to college to become a therapist. I want to do nursing because there are always jobs, and it's a way to earn money to achieve my long-term goal. And, to be an independent therapist I need a solid foundation working with people, which I can do as a nurse.

Staff at Newark OYN programs have experienced their own mindset shifts that benefit opportunity youth. Through meetings every other week and a two-week summer institute, Newark OYN brings together educators serving disconnected youth in traditional district schools, charter schools, and community-based programs for common professional development on teaching strategies and practices. Intended to build capacity of schools and educators to address the academic needs of disconnected youth, these meetings have also let teachers from different education settings collaborate on common challenges and potential solutions.

"I'd never seen a group of teachers from the school district, charter, and CBOs [community-based organizations] come together to make their work better for students—regardless of the type of setting they worked in," one participant said of a passionate debate in one meeting about evaluating student work using a common cognitive skills rubric.

In this community, network-affiliated educators have reported feeling less isolated and better equipped to, as they say, "get students where they need to be."

### *Changing Approaches*

For Newark OYN to achieve its goal of improving systemic supports for disconnected youth, it must enhance the capacity of its partners to respond to the needs of disconnected youth. Newark OYN has worked to change the way its partners approach disconnected youth in three ways.

**Professional development and coaching.** Newark OYN provides common professional development and coaching to network-affiliated program staff, school leaders, and educators to ensure systematic implementation of its model principles. Topics include conducting interventions, building relationships with youth who have experienced trauma, and implementing restorative practices with

*"It takes time to shift mindsets, to accept that your practice may not be the best practice. Now, we are in a space where people are willing to buy in."*—Jasmine Joseph-Forman, Newark Opportunity Youth Network's director of program and supports

*“We believe in our model. Wherever the nearly 7,000 Newark youth in need can get help and feel comfortable with the services—we want them to go there. At the same time, across Newark OYN, no matter where youth choose to go, we want there to be a level of uniformity in the quality of service they receive.”*

—SanDonna Jones,  
Newark Opportunity  
Youth Network’s  
executive director of  
administration and  
development

fidelity. Newark OYN has also instituted some universal practices across programs. For example, to enhance college- and career-readiness, students in all network-affiliated programs develop a college and career life plan that outlines their goals after high school graduation. Newark OYN’s vision is clear: “Graduation is the beginning of something, not the pinnacle of success,” Robert Clark, Newark OYN’s CEO, said. Newark OYN programs have also incorporated key post-secondary benchmarks (such as enrollment, persistence, completion) into the network data collection system.

**Measurement.** Newark OYN also implemented new measurement protocols, including academic and social-emotional assessments administered to all students in network-affiliated education programs (such as NWEA’s Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)<sup>27</sup> and the MESH survey tools<sup>28</sup>) to assess individual growth. The Efforts-To-Outcomes (ETO)<sup>29</sup> data system provides ongoing relevant data on all network services provided to opportunity youth. This common data system captures program information such as student attendance and participation and services rendered, helping Newark OYN track progress toward established performance benchmarks, identify areas for improvement, and target technical assistance supports. The universal use of ETO by all network-affiliated programs provides a means of assessing overall performance by each partner organization and as a network. It also allows aggregate reporting that reveals the greater impact Newark OYN has as a collective, which in turn fosters increased unity among partners.

**Policy.** The Newark Public School (NPS) district’s adoption of a revised discipline policy (see “NPS Discipline Policy,” page 29) marks another early Newark OYN accomplishment with potential to prevent students from leaving school. Though the new policy is promising, anecdotal information suggest a need to review how schools are implementing the new policy. To better understand its impact, Newark OYN plans to analyze data from all NPS schools and determine the need for school staff training to ensure that the revised policy is equitably and uniformly applied.

## *Informing the National Landscape*

Across the country, more than 20 urban, rural, and tribal communities have organized, collectively driven initiatives focused on supporting disconnected youth. With backing from the Aspen Opportunity Youth Forum<sup>30</sup> and philanthropic supporters, these communities created an informal coalition that is helping to drive national conversation and improve community responses to issues affecting disconnected youth. Among these groups, initiatives generally reflect two primary purposes in bringing together partners and stakeholders: advocating for coordinated responses to challenges disconnected youth face or implementing education services for disconnected youth and supports for service providers. Against this landscape, Newark OYN stands out for pursuing both strategies. Its success with this dual-pronged approach may inform how existing and new opportunity youth initiatives engage partners for collective approaches in the future.

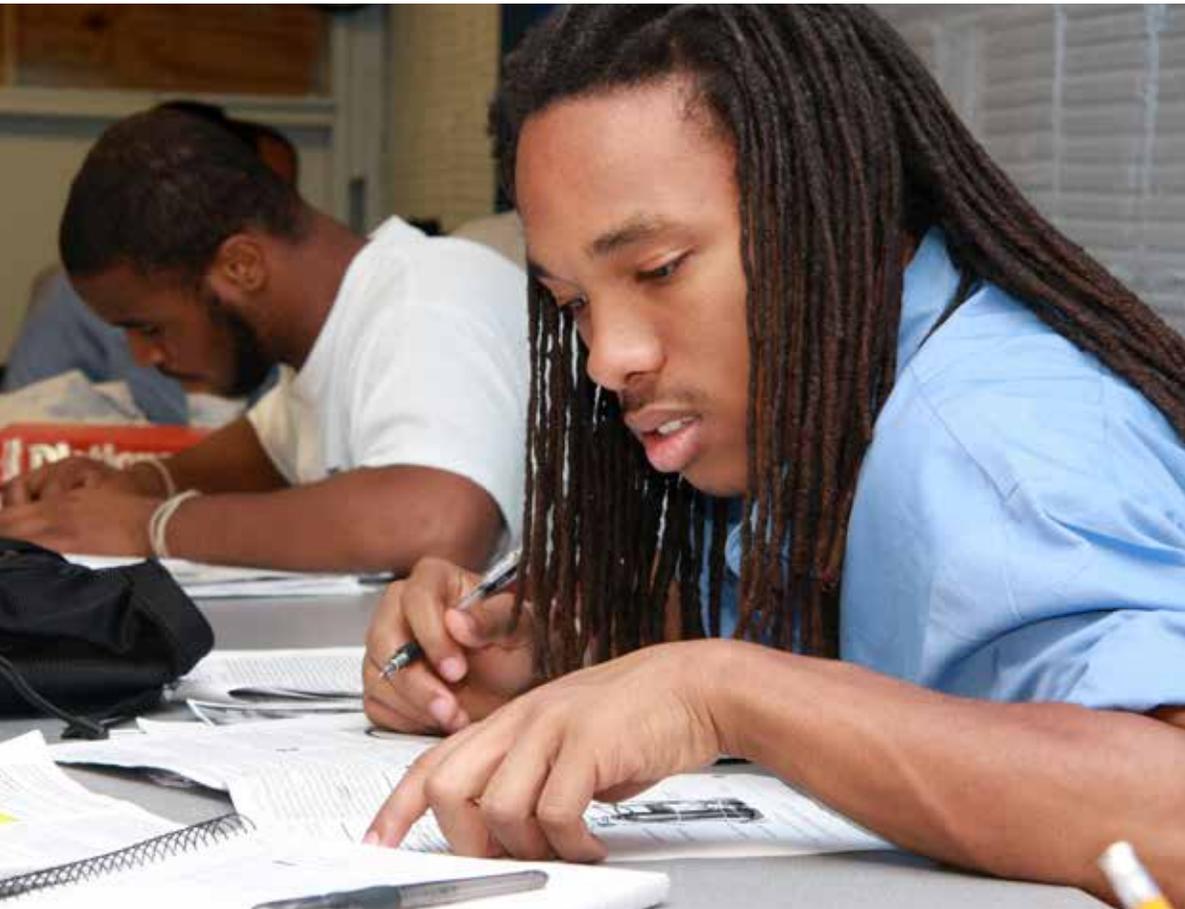
The complexity and breadth of its strategy also distinguishes Newark OYN from other community-based opportunity youth initiatives. “Newark stands out for the scale and comprehensiveness of its approach,” says Lili Allen, associate

vice president leading reconnection designs with Jobs for the Future, a national nonprofit that drives changes in the American workforce and education systems to promote economic advancement and works across the country to help young adults/opportunity youth get on a path to skilled jobs. In its first two years, Newark OYN has executed a multipronged initiative that simultaneously implemented six key components of its overall strategy. Reflecting an ambitious agenda to both increase essential services and push systems-level policy change, Newark OYN's early accomplishments include:

- \* Reopening of the district's Re-Engagement Center,
- \* Redesign of the district's transfer high school,
- \* Redesign of the district's alternative placement for long-term suspensions,
- \* Coordination of network partners and other key groups to revise the district's discipline policy,
- \* Providing capacity-building for a subset of community-based organizations implementing the Newark OYN model, and
- \* The design, launch, and management of the state's first alternative charter school.

*“Newark OYN and its partners are thinking deeply about this work, gaining traction, and pushing the envelope. We started early with a comprehensive strategy to pull all the necessary levers at the same time.”*  
—Robert Clark, Newark Opportunity Youth Network's chief executive officer

Photo courtesy Newark OYN





**N**ewark OYN leaders have gleaned early key insights about driving collective action to serve opportunity youth and set them on a path to future success.

**To succeed, networks need a common vision.** Newark OYN leaders and partners share a vision that the lives of disconnected youth can be changed for the better. Though network partners represent diverse organizations and interests, this common vision unites them in purpose, motivating them to collaborate and coordinate their efforts to meet the needs of disconnected youth. Newark OYN’s accomplishments in just its first two years attest to how commitment to a shared vision can speed the pace of positive developments. Newark OYN has used its model to shift and shape beliefs, helping partners recognize the potential that each youth has to succeed. Its model also provides a framework of key principles that allows network partners to articulate their role in achieving the shared vision and implementing it in their respective work for disconnected youth.

**When adults work together, youth benefit.** Newark OYN engages leaders invested in the educational and life outcomes for Newark’s youth to help target and streamline supports for disconnected youth. Early indicators suggest that Newark OYN’s two-pronged approach to service delivery—coordinating educational, vocational, and other youth services through a systematized reengagement process, and collectively planning and strengthening those services through targeted technical assistance and professional development—leads to more effective services and more efficient service delivery. A shared commitment to improving outcomes for disconnected youth motivated network partners to come together, and recognition of mutual benefits for network partners will keep them engaged.

Photo courtesy Newark OYN

**Opportunity youth need a new and different school experience.** Though many external factors contribute to youth disengaging from school, traditional school settings also fail them. Thus, when disconnected youth are ready to resume their education, they need a different school experience.

Recognizing this dynamic, the Newark OYN model reflects the understanding that:

- \* Relationships with both peers and adults have to be different;
- \* School design elements (such as curriculum, schedules, performance measures, social and emotional supports, staffing structures, and physical space) have to meet youth where they are; and
- \* Students need to be empowered by owning both the decisions that caused them to go off track and those that will put them back on track.

**Opportunity youth respond to relatable role models who believe in them.**

Newark OYN intentionally selects the staff who work with disconnected youth. As a former disconnected youth himself, Newark OYN CEO Robert Clark believes strongly that the breadth of their needs requires the network to provide a multi-faceted set of supports as well as a dedicated staff that reflects the diversity of the students it serves and believes in their potential to succeed.

Deliberate selection and training of staff members helps youth develop trusting relationships that are fundamental to the Newark OYN model. Accordingly, Newark OYN seeks highly skilled and experienced professionals with diverse talents and experiences that enable them to better relate to students. Newark OYN wants students to recognize something in the staff that fosters a connection that leads to a trusting relationship, and they want the insights that staff members gain from those relationships to inform the network's decision making about service delivery.

Newark OYN also seeks demographic diversity among staff that reflects the population they serve. In Newark, the overwhelming majority of students (90 percent) are either African-American or Latino, and 84 percent come from low-income families.<sup>31</sup> Factors contributing to school disengagement disproportionately affect low-income students of color.<sup>32</sup> Because disconnected youth face challenges related to poverty and discrimination, the students Newark OYN serves are empowered by seeing positive, successful, intelligent, community-minded people who look like them actively working to change lives and systems.



## NEWARK OYN'S NEXT STEPS

**N**ewark OYN's plans for the future are as ambitious in scope as its accomplishments to date. In the years ahead, Newark OYN aims to build from the success of its first two years, focusing on four fundamental areas of work:

1. Increasing the number and variety of high-quality educational opportunities aligned to youth development services across the city,
2. Building the capacity of its partners and programs,
3. Ensuring funding sustainability, and
4. Advocating for policy changes that support opportunity youth.

### *Increasing Quality Seats*

Newark OYN plans to increase the number of high-quality seats in the network of schools and programs that serve disconnected youth. This involves increasing capacity while simultaneously improving quality. Newark OYN established LEAD Charter School to anchor the network's education program options and demonstrate a cost-effective education program for disconnected youth sustained by public funding. In 2018, the state approved modification of LEAD's original charter to allow the school to increase enrollment from a maximum capacity of 240 students to 480.

Newark OYN and LEAD leaders also plan to further refine the school's design so that students experience it even less like a traditional school. Beginning in 2018–19, LEAD will expand its career and technical education curriculum to include more

health and technology options and to incorporate longer job-site learning opportunities. LEAD also intends to draw tighter connections from academic and career course offerings to post-secondary program opportunities offered through Newark OYN's community-based organization partners.

In support of LEAD's redesign initiative, Newark OYN hired a post-secondary pathways manager in November 2017 to develop new partnerships among local businesses, higher education institutions, and community organizations with accredited post-secondary programs (see "Community-Based Organizations," page 37, and "New Community Corporation Meets Disconnected Youths' Needs Holistically," page 40). Newark OYN aims to link network program offerings to emerging CTE opportunities for Newark OYN students.

## *Enhancing Capacity*

**Data systems.** Recognizing that growth is driven by a continuous cycle of assessment and improvement, Newark OYN is focused on increasing the network's capacity to collect, analyze, and report data. Newark OYN is exploring ways to improve systemic use of its network-wide data system to track individual students as they participate in Newark OYN programs, and to map their outcomes as they progress through Newark OYN programs, to assess what is working and where the network and its programs may improve. In addition, Newark OYN will use this data to inform the technical assistance OYN provides to its network partners.

**Connection with employers.** Newark OYN also plans to provide additional supports that will bolster the network's increasing focus on guiding youth to post-secondary pathways that lead to a viable career. As noted, Newark OYN hired a dedicated post-secondary pathways manager to support program graduates in accessing and thriving in post-secondary school and employment opportunities. Newark OYN is already working to incorporate programmatic features that will more closely align network programs with employment needs and opportunities in Newark. Newark OYN is also working to engage the city's business sector in the network and tap into citywide workforce development initiatives—such as Newark 2020, a vision to connect 2,020 unemployed residents with work by that year—and efforts led by city organizations such as Newark's Workforce Development Board.

**Growing leaders.** Newark OYN will also focus on strengthening leadership capacity across the network. It recognizes the importance of continuously developing the skills of its own staff and those of its network partners as well as the need for continuous improvement of internal and cross-sector communications. A network-wide data system and more frequent communications among Newark OYN leaders and program staff will help knit the network closer together.

**Potential for geographic expansion.** Newark OYN envisions that evidence of positive outcomes will invite opportunity to expand its model throughout its home of Essex County and statewide. At a minimum, Newark OYN sees the potential need to expand its capacity to provide technical assistance to other New Jersey communities with high proportions of disconnected youth, so it can replicate its most critical strategy elements, such as the Re-Engagement Center and the alternative charter high school.

## *Ensuring Sustainability*

As with any collective initiative, Newark OYN's endurance requires ongoing funding. Without public funds dedicated explicitly to reengaging disconnected youth, Newark OYN relies on the combined resources of the private and public partners in its network.

It is also planning on LEAD Charter School continuing to generate a sustainable stream of public funding that specifically supports high-quality school seats for disconnected youth. A unique element of the Newark OYN model, LEAD demonstrates Newark OYN's understanding of how public resources can be accessed to support disconnected youth. But Newark OYN also advocates for policy changes that will create dedicated funding for disconnected youth. Other communities have created a public revenue stream for programs and organizations serving disconnected youth. For example, in 2010 the state of Washington approved public funds to support a statewide dropout reengagement system encouraging districts, charter schools, and other community organizations to develop education programs for 16- to 21-year-olds who have left school without a degree or are not expected to graduate by age 21.<sup>33</sup> As Newark OYN collects more data on positive outcomes, it will be better positioned to advocate for public funds to be dedicated to high-quality educational programs for disconnected youth.

The district's transition back to local control after over 20 years of state management may have implications for Newark OYN's future. Newark Public Schools joined the network under the leadership of a state-appointed superintendent. The district's school board installed a new superintendent in July 2018. Newark OYN is committed to working with the new leadership to advance the public-private partnership they have forged and continue district-based OYN programs such as UPLIFT Academy. As a network of many partners, Newark OYN acknowledges is it bigger than just one partner and seeks to move forward with the collective strength of all partners existing at any given time.

## *Advocating for Policy Change*

Long-term, sustained improvements require both widespread recognition of the risk factors that result in young people getting off track in school and collective efforts to address these challenges. To that end, Newark OYN will pursue an advocacy agenda that addresses city and state policies that impede creating or improving services for disconnected youth or at-risk students. For example, OYN will promote an accountability performance framework specific to schools serving disconnected youth. It will also encourage improved coordination of funding directed to programs and services for disconnected or at-risk students.

As of this writing, Newark OYN is focusing attention on two fronts in support of its advocacy work. First, it is working with city leaders to develop a plan for relaunching a citywide youth policy board composed of representatives from key government and community organizations that would allocate funds to organizations serving disconnected youth and establish quality indicators and reporting requirements for them. Second, as previously discussed, Newark OYN is working

on improving its data collection, reporting, and analysis to produce evidence that informs and strengthens its advocacy agenda. Newark OYN also recognizes that it will need to improve mechanisms for sharing data with the public.

A critical part of its advocacy strategy is promoting visibility of disconnected youth and the contributions they can make to society. Newark OYN plans to identify and create more opportunities for disconnected youth to be seen and heard on network, education, and social system policies that affect their ability to reach their potential. For example, LEAD Charter School will create a youth policy council composed of student representatives who serve as an intermediary between the student body and school staff. In addition to other leadership responsibilities, their primary role will be to negotiate on behalf of the student body regarding school policies that affect students and school life.

## CONCLUSION

In its early years, Newark OYN has pursued an ambitious plan to create a broad safety net for students who have not found success in traditional schools. The network's partners seek to address the broad underlying issues that cause students to disengage from school and to show what supports, services, and policy changes help these youth achieve positive outcomes. Newark OYN is forging its own path to change the storyline of *disconnected* youth to *opportunity* youth.



Photo courtesy Newark OYN

## NOTES

1. Based on a data analysis conducted by Newark Public Schools and obtained from OYN indicating that in the 2014–15 school year, about 3,880 students between 16 and 20 years old had left school. Federal census data indicate that in 2015, 5,942 people between ages 18 and 24 did not have a high school degree. U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Educational attainment*.
2. Based on a data analysis conducted by Newark Public Schools and obtained from OYN indicating that in the 2014–15 school year, 33 percent of enrolled students between ages 15 and 21 were over-age and under-credited.
3. Based on federal census data from 2014–16. U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.)
4. Based on interviews with OYN staff in June 2018.
5. Though states vary in how they define chronic absenteeism, the U.S. Department of Education defines it as missing 15 or more days of school in a year. U.S. Department of Education. (2016, October 27). *Chronic absenteeism in the nation's schools*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html#four>; New Jersey's Department of Education defines chronic absenteeism as the percentage of a school's students who are absent for 10 percent or more of the days that that they were "in membership" at a school. New Jersey Department of Education. (2017). *Every Student Succeeds Act: New Jersey State Plan*. Retrieved from <https://www.state.nj.us/education/ESSA/plan/plan.pdf>; New Jersey state law requires that schools be in session a minimum of 180 instructional days in a school year. N.J. Stat. Ann. § 18A:7F-9.
6. In the 2014–15 school year, Newark Public Schools data obtained from OYN suggests that 33 percent of enrolled students between ages 15 and 21 were over-age and under-credited.
7. Based on interviews with OYN staff in June 2018.
8. U.S. Census Bureau. 2012–16 American Community Survey 5-year estimates retrieved from [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml)
9. Advocates for Children of New Jersey. (2017). *Kids Count Newark 2017: A city profile of child well-being*. Newark, NJ: Author. Retrieved from [https://acnj.org/downloads/2017\\_03\\_16\\_Kids\\_Count\\_Newark.pdf](https://acnj.org/downloads/2017_03_16_Kids_Count_Newark.pdf)
10. Only 18 percent of jobs in Newark are held by Newark's residents. New Jersey Institute for Social Justice. (2017). *Bridging the two Americas: Employment & economic opportunity in Newark & beyond*. Newark, NJ: Author. Retrieved from [https://community-wealth.org/sites/clone.community-wealth.org/files/downloads/Bridging\\_the\\_Two\\_Americas\\_rev\\_5-11a\\_Without\\_Crop\\_Marks.pdf](https://community-wealth.org/sites/clone.community-wealth.org/files/downloads/Bridging_the_Two_Americas_rev_5-11a_Without_Crop_Marks.pdf)
11. Burd-Sharps, S. & Lewis, K. (2018). *More than a million reasons for hope: Youth disconnection in America today*. Measure of America of the Social Service Research Council. Retrieved from <https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/dy18.full.report.pdf>
12. Burd-Sharps & Lewis. (2018). More than a million reasons.
13. Burd-Sharps & Lewis. (2018). More than a million reasons.
14. Belfield, C. R., Levin, H. M., & Rosen, R. (2012, January). *The economic value of opportunity youth*. Americas Promise. Retrieved from [http://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/files/d8/legacy/bodyfiles/Econ\\_Value\\_Youth\\_Jan\\_11\\_2012.pdf](http://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/files/d8/legacy/bodyfiles/Econ_Value_Youth_Jan_11_2012.pdf)
15. Alliance for Excellent Education. (2013). *The economic benefits of increasing the high school graduation rate for public school students*. Retrieved from [https://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/New\\_Jersey\\_econ.pdf](https://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/New_Jersey_econ.pdf)
16. Newark Public Schools. (2016, November 3). The Opportunity Youth Network announces comprehensive strategy to support Newark's most disconnected youth [Press release]. Retrieved from <http://www.nps.k12.nj.us/press-releases/opportunity-youth-network-announces-comprehensive-strategy-support-newarks-disconnected-youth/>
17. According to Newark OYN staff, only 11 percent of youth attending the Restorative Center are over-age and under-credited, but 100 percent are students of color, and 83 percent are male. All youth attending the Restorative Center report experiencing violence in their community, school, family—or are perpetrators or victims of violence themselves;

a quarter were involved in a school incident that led to court involvement, while just over half are gang-related. Youth at the Restorative Center also represent a disproportionately high rate of students (28 percent) who receive special education services compared to the district average (16 percent), and at a rate that is exceptionally high given the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act stipulation that students with disabilities must go through a process to determine if their underlying behavior is the result of their disability and that they have a functional behavior assessment and corresponding behavior intervention plan in place. See Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004 Reauthorized Statute), Discipline, retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/tb-discipline.pdf>

18. Reported by OYN, Dr. Dwayne Davis, on July 16, 2018.

19. International Institute for Restorative Practices. (n.d.) What is Restorative Practices? Retrieved from <https://www.iirp.edu/what-we-do/what-is-restorative-practices>

20. For more information, see: WIOA Statewide and Local Performance Report Template, U.S. Departments of Labor and Education, June 2017 (for use in Performance Year 2018), retrieved from [https://doleta.gov/performance/pfdocs/ETA\\_9169\\_12.4.2017.pdf](https://doleta.gov/performance/pfdocs/ETA_9169_12.4.2017.pdf)

21. NCC reports that it intentionally sets tuition rates to match the federal Pell Grant, because all of its program participants qualify for this federal student aid.

22. United States of America v. City of Newark. (Filed April 29, 2016). United States District Court for the District of New Jersey, Case 2:16-cv-01731-MCA-MAH. Retrieved from [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/582c35\\_8f30b967fd4e1cb75ed859122070ef.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/582c35_8f30b967fd4e1cb75ed859122070ef.pdf); U.S. Dept. of Justice. (2016, March 30). Justice Department reaches agreement with City of Newark, New Jersey, to reform police department's unconstitutional practices [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-reaches-agreement-city-newark-new-jersey-reform-police-department-s>

23. Public Impact: Kim, J., Hassel, B. C., Hargrave, E., Boast, L., Holly, C., & Ellison, S. (2015). *Early lessons from Newark's experience with charter schools*. Menlo Park, CA: Startup:Education. Retrieved from [https://publicimpact.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Early\\_Lessons\\_from-Newarks\\_Experience\\_With\\_Charter\\_Schools-Public\\_Impact.pdf](https://publicimpact.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Early_Lessons_from-Newarks_Experience_With_Charter_Schools-Public_Impact.pdf)

24. Reported by OYN, Dr. Dwayne Davis, on July 16, 2018

25. Reported by OYN, Dr. Dwayne Davis, on July 16, 2018.

26. Reported by OYN, Dr. Dwayne Davis, on July 16, 2018.

27. NWEA's Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) is a widely used academic assessment that measures what students know and what they are ready to learn. MAP is designed to help educators pinpoint where to support individual students and compare growth over time. See <https://www.nwea.org/the-map-suite/> for more information.

28. Mindsets, essential skills, and habits (MESH) survey tools measure research-based social and emotional competencies that are correlated to success in college, career, and life. These competencies include self-efficacy, self-management, growth mindset, and social awareness. See <https://www.transformingeducation.org/measuring-mesh/> for more information.

29. ETO is a comprehensive outcomes and case management tool, developed by Social Solutions, for use by multiple partners and capable of collecting and analyzing high volumes of data from many programs. Social Solutions. (n.d.). An enterprise SaaS solution for the human services sector. Retrieved from <https://www.socialsolutions.com/software/eto/>

30. The Aspen Opportunity Youth Forum, established in 2012, was originally called the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund. Capitalizing on momentum from the White House Council on Community Solutions, this national effort aims to spur local innovation to reconnect the then-estimated 6.7 million opportunity youth who were out of work and school across the country. Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. (n.d.) Opportunity Youth Forum. Retrieved from <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/opportunity-youth-forum/>

31. Newark Public Schools. (n.d.). District summary (2017–18). Retrieved from <http://www.nps.k12.nj.us/departments/data-research/district-summary/>

32. Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies. (2017). *Opportunity Youth Network: Capturing Youth Voices to Shape Newark's Reengagement Efforts*. Newark, New Jersey: Rutgers University. This Cornwall study highlights findings including: 1) A previous analysis by Cornwall Center of a cohort of 2,695 Newark Public School students who were enrolled in the ninth grade in the 2010–11 school year, which found that only 56 percent of the students graduated four years later in the 2013–14 school year, and that the completion rates for black and Latino male students were 47 and 50 percent respectively; 2) an analysis of that cohort's performance on the state standardized test administered to eighth-graders at the time, showing that among the 45 percent of Newark Public School students partially proficient in reading, 60 percent were black, and among the 61 percent partially proficient in math, 73 percent were black; and another Rutgers analysis showing that 32 percent of black males received an out-of-school suspension at least once during their high school tenure, compared to the next-highest suspension rates of 22 percent for black females.

33. RCW 28A.175.100 et seq. (2010). Retrieved from <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.175.100>