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Challenge to Our Workforce: Young Adults and Low Literacy



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Peter Kleinbard

Nearly 70% of youth who drop out of school have very poor literacy and other core skills. Indeed, this is the primary reason why they leave school. Yet most funding for dropouts is targeted to those who are most job ready, focusing on quick placement in employment. This is true of both current funding and the dollars in the Obama Stimulus bill. This must change if we are to enable this large population to become financially independent.

In New York, this affects about 100,000 youth; nationally more than 2 million. Without intensive and sustained further education, they cannot gain

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the skills that they will need.

The current approach hardly makes sense in light of today's economy when young people will be competing for jobs with more mature and experienced adults. Changes in state and local guidelines for the use of these funds will be necessary to provide longer-term, intensive skill-building that truly meets the needs of our young people and our economy.

"The U. S. economy is changing rapidly in ways that have disastrous consequences for workers who lack The New Basic Skills - skills that were unnecessary for many good jobs even 15 years ago," wrote economists Richard Levy and Frank Murnane, of MIT and Harvard respectively, nearly a dozen years ago. "There are the 'hard skills' including the ability to do basic mathematics and to understand written instructions. There are the soft skills including the ability to communicate clearly and to work productively in groups to solve problems. And there are the elementary computer skills."

The cost of our failure to provide generations of disconnected youth with these "New Basics" is tragic for the individuals involved and depletes neighborhoods of large numbers of young people in the most productive years of their lives. It also results in lower civic participation as these youth vote in far fewer numbers than ones with more education.

Andrew Sum, a researcher at Northeastern University who has specialized in this problem, has calculated that the combined income and tax losses from a single year's dropouts is about \$192 billion—1.6 percent of the gross domestic product.

The good news is that there is no need to invent solutions to this problem. While there has been increased attention recently to youth who struggle in high school or fail to graduate, there has been little recognition of the remarkable progress young people are making – when provided with the right tools.

Take April, for example. She dropped out of high school in New York City, but eventually got a BA and won a prize at CUNY for her work. "When I was coming up in New York City, I didn't attend school much" she told in *New Youth Connections*, a newspaper written by young people. "I went to 9th grade for maybe a month. But I didn't have the skills to keep up." Homeless and out of school at 18, April enrolled in a demanding program of education with strong personal supports. She passed the GED, and got her BA in literature and writing. Now headed for a Master's degree, she hopes to teach literature at a community college. "It wasn't that I was unable to learn. I just needed the opportunity and a safe space to root myself and grow," she says.

As April's case shows, we have learned a lot about how to address this problem. Not only can

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- 03/10
Neighborhood Housing Services of Staten Island Inc., Presents: FORECLOSURE PREVENTION ORIENTATION
- 03/10
FREE Prenatal Health Education Classes
- 03/10
"Preparing for Reporting Requirements & Audit Compliance Issues"
- 03/12
In Sickness & In Health: Understanding & Supporting the Older Couple
- 03/12
New Destiny Housing Corporation will host its Annual Cocktail Benefit

many of these youth attain higher skills, increasingly, there is evidence that they can succeed in post-secondary education, an essential step to labor market success. Over the last several years, in several cities, departments of education, non-profit organizations and private funders have undertaken the fight against low educational attainment among young adults.

The results are impressive: for example, compared to a graduation rate of 19% in regular high schools, New York City Department of Education high schools dedicated to this population boast an average graduation rate of 65%.

Community Education Pathways to Success (CEPS), a program for youth between 16 - 24 years of age who have dropped out and read below the 8th grade level has shown promising results since its inception in 2005. According to an independent evaluation by Campbell-Kibler Associates, CEPS participants averaged literacy gains of 1.5 years and math gains of nearly 1 year in less than one semester of study. After one year of program experience, organizations serving these youth have doubled the number of students they serve while keeping the same level of increase in literacy levels.

Scaling-up programs and supports for these youth will require dedicated public funding and development of policies based on successful models that stress literacy and other core skills as a priority that comes ahead of quick job placement. Looking beyond the stimulus package, key legislation coming up over the next two years to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act must be modified away from a focus on quick job placement towards the drivers of longer term career success. And, funding should be increased sharply. It is outrageous that this, the major source of public funds for dropouts, serves fewer than 1,000 youth annually in New York City.

Fortunately, both public and private sector leaders in New York City recognize this problem, but they are handcuffed by federal guidelines for the use of these funds and the way that success is measured. Now is a time when all of those involved in youth work and in building a strong labor force, must come together to push our legislators to bring about change.

This challenge did not emerge overnight. It derives from a combination of historical inequities and institutional failures. Programs by themselves are not a silver bullet. A coordinated and aggressive campaign building on efforts that have demonstrated success and that incorporate policy, program and long-term investment can enable these young people to move forward to their futures, and thus ensure the future of our communities.

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Whether in education or social services, we must meet people where they are. The greatest problems for students / clients derive from providers who prefer to follow their own script, regardless of the student's / client's individual needs.

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