

Disconnected Youth

in the Research Triangle Region:
An Ominous Problem Hidden in Plain Sight

**A Report to The North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation
By MDC, Inc., August 2008**

Introduction

In September 2006, the North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation commissioned MDC, Inc. of Chapel Hill to analyze the problem of “disconnected youth” in the Research Triangle region, determine the current state of the region’s responses to the challenge, and recommend steps to deepen and accelerate action on the issue.

The research process was multifaceted. MDC staff conducted background research on the factors that are correlated with youth disconnection, drawing heavily on a number of recent national studies produced in response to growing national concern about the issue. We conducted interviews with over two dozen key informants in local and county government, public schools, community-based organizations, and the business and faith community to gauge the

depth of concern and quality of response among Triangle leaders. We surveyed more than 100 front-line community-based organizations that consider service to disadvantaged youth an important part of their mission, receiving responses from 53 organizations and substantive responses from more than 30. We scanned the nation for innovative examples of community, neighborhood, and agency strategies to address the challenge of disconnected youth.

The resulting report contains:

- A working definition and an analytic framework for exploring the issue of disconnected youth;
- A data-based portrait of disconnected youth in the Triangle – who they are and where they live;
- A strategy matrix for assessing the region’s current efforts to remediate and prevent youth disconnection, based on national research on necessary interventions and promising strategies;
- Recommendations for program and policy action, including specific opportunities for the philanthropic and business communities, particularly the North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation.

We have chosen to focus the report on the question “what actions can lead to progress on the issue of disconnected youth?” Accordingly, MDC presents a menu of opportunities based on promising ideas in place in the Triangle and across the nation that will en-

able leaders and funders in the region to put disconnected youth on a secure pathway to productive adulthood. Different readers may gravitate toward different points of leverage and intervention. The size and seriousness of the problem creates an opportunity for leadership across a wide continuum of action.

Many people contributed to the development of this report. MDC is grateful for the support and guidance of the staff and directors of the North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation in making this study possible. We are also indebted to the many community practitioners, elected and appointed officials, and colleagues in the research and advocacy communities who shared their insights and ideas so generously with us. Their interest in and commitment to helping disconnected young people reorient their lives offers hope that we can make progress on a problem that costs us all dearly. John Quintero of South by North Strategies in Chapel Hill provided an indispensable analysis of recent data that

allowed us to sharpen our portrait of disconnected youth. The generous and perceptive advice of Adria Steinberg and Lucretia Murphy at Jobs for the Future in Boston shortened our learning curve and widened our perspective. Peter Edelman of the Georgetown University Law Center enriched our thinking with his passionate and probing analysis of disconnected black men and his views on public policy. Bonnie Gordon, Richard Hart, Verna Lalbeharrrie, Mirinda Kossoff, and Daniel Bowes of MDC gave critical feedback at important times. Thank you all.

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For MDC, Inc.

Defining the Challenge

The vast majority of American youth make a successful transition to adulthood. Yet a staggering 2.8 million young people—10 percent of youth and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24—are neither in school or working, placing them at high risk of subsequent economic and social hardship. Nowhere in America is the concentration of these “disconnected” young people greater than in the South. According to research by Michael Wald and Tia Martinez (2003), while the South is home to approximately 35 percent of all 18 to 24 year olds, it accounts for 47 percent of disconnected young men and 43 percent of disconnected young women. Wald and Martinez further conclude that the South has more disconnected young adults than the Northeast and West combined, with nearly 61 percent of the nation’s disconnected African-American males living in the region. Sadly, the Research Triangle region, a progressive

pacesetter for the South in so many arenas, is not immune from these troubling trends.

On a continuum of youth outcomes running from “thriving and poised for successful adulthood” on one end to “chronically alienated and distressed” on another, disconnected youth and youth at high risk of falling into disconnection occupy a broad middle ground. Some young people stumble temporarily but manage to overcome weak performance in school or unsupportive living situations through resilience and with the help of caring adults and responsive community programs. They are the fortunate ones. Further along the continuum are those for whom school, family, and community provide much more tenuous and erratic support. These young people are much more vulnerable to the downward pull of disconnection. If they succumb, life prospects can become bleak with-

out deep, concerted efforts to place them on the path to constructive adulthood. Still further along the continuum are young people who have made bad choices, paid the consequences, but wish to turn their lives around before a life of anti-social behavior becomes the norm. America, North Carolina, and the Triangle have significant numbers of youth in each category. As degrees of disconnection vary, so should the responses and solutions.

In analyzing the challenge and framing the solution, MDC chose to define “disconnected youth” as young people aged 16-24¹ who are:

- Not in school or lacking a high-school degree
- Not working or connected to the legitimate labor market
- Lacking strong connections to caring adults and community supports.

These youth may also be involved in the criminal justice system.

Our analysis also takes into account youth who are highly vulnerable to disconnection unless preventative measures are taken.

These young people may be:

- Struggling in school, regularly performing below grade level
- Poorly oriented to and prepared for the legitimate labor market
- Living in high-poverty families, often headed by a single parent
- In or exiting foster care
- At-risk of sanction by the criminal justice system.

Youth disconnection is sometimes linked with—but is not synonymous with—gang violence. Concerned Triangle community leaders

have recently begun to focus fresh attention on rising levels of gang participation and violence in Durham and Wake counties. This concern is timely and necessary. Yet gang violence is in fact an extreme expression of a much more pervasive issue: the high number of disconnected youth living and languishing in our communities. If gang violence is a “front-and-center” pathology, the problem of disconnected youth is a tragedy “hidden in plain sight.”

¹ The age range of 16-24 was selected to align with national organizations such as American Youth Policy Forum. However, data analysis included age 15.

The High Cost of Youth Disconnection

Youth disconnection is like a disease that becomes more serious if ignored or untreated. The eventual costs and consequences are high both for youth themselves and for society as a whole. Young people who fail to complete high school earn lower wages and are much more likely to become long-term unemployed than their more educated peers. In 2006, the median weekly wage for high school dropouts 25 and older was \$419; for holders of an associate's degree, \$721. According to Wald and Martinez (2003), in 2000, a period of low unemployment, barely more than 50 percent of high school dropouts were employed, contrasted with 93 percent of adults holding an associate's degree or better. Between 1997 and 2001, over a quarter of high school dropouts were unemployed for a year or longer. Even more

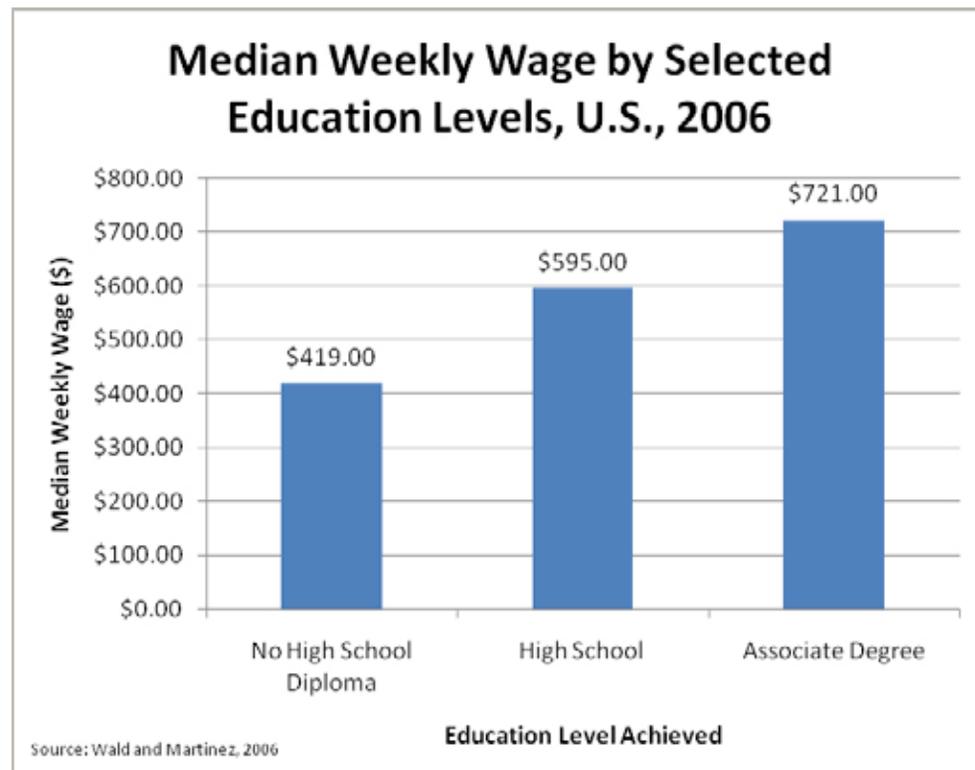
ominously, 16 percent of all young men aged 18 to 24 who lack a high school degree or General Educational Development certificate (GED) are estimated to be in prison or on parole at any given time. The corresponding figure for African-American males is 30 percent, higher than the proportion of African American males in higher education (Wald and Martinez, 2003).

The economic cost of low educational attainment and youth disconnection grows greater when considered against the background of demographic change. The nation, the South, North Carolina, and the Triangle are entering a period during which a growing proportion of our prime age workers will come from African-American and Latino ranks. These are precisely the demographic groups that

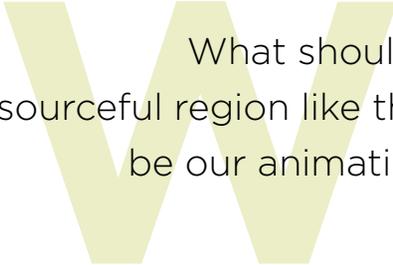
experience the highest rates of youth disconnection. In the coming decades, 80 percent of new jobs will require education beyond high school. By failing to reverse the growing tide of disconnected youth, we undercut our ability to field a competitive workforce in a high-skill, knowledge-driven economy.

Finally, the social costs that attend persistent and growing youth disconnection, while hard to calculate, are nevertheless corrosive. Healthy communities thrive on social cohesion. Divided communities struggle to develop. Significant pools of disconnected young people, like those now developing in some Triangle localities, will ultimately tarnish the appeal of our region and invalidate our claims to be “world class.”

Figure 1



A Vision for Youth Success



What should a thriving, ambitious, and resourceful region like the Triangle offer its youth? What should be our animating vision for all young people?

Making progress on youth disconnection in the Triangle begs the issue of what the region aspires to for its young people. MDC's analysis therefore begins with a question:

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The field of positive youth development offers a constructive way to approach an answer

(Connell, Gambone, and Smith, 2003). The positive youth development framework suggests that communities should establish a set of long-term goals for youth, establish milestones to measure their developmental progress, define the community supports required for youth success, and reform community policy and practice to create a supportive community. Drawing on this approach, MDC has developed a vision for youth success in the Triangle against which we assess the current situation that disconnected youth face:

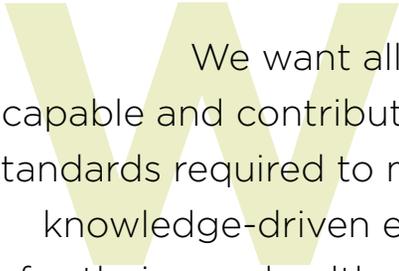
We want all youth in the Triangle to become capable and contributing adults. They should be educated to the standards required to make their way successfully in a competitive, knowledge-driven economy. They should be skilled at caring for their own health and safety and at maintaining constructive relationships with others. They should advance the common good and exercise the basic responsibilities of citizenship and have opportunities to contribute to the broader community. In short, all our youth should be socially and economically productive and skillful at navigating the opportunities and challenges of adolescence and young adulthood.

What will it take for this vision to be realized in the Triangle? Minimally, we should ensure all youth finish high school or its equivalent prepared for post-secondary education; have workplace experience that positions them to secure value-adding, living-wage work as adults; exhibit healthy and responsible personal and interpersonal behavior; and acquire the skills to contribute to the community. For youth to meet these expectations, society needs to develop a coordinated system of fundamental building blocks:

- A strong, well-aligned K-16 education system that provides students with an appropriate blend of challenge and support. The system should include vigorous alternative and second-chance options for youth who do not succeed in traditional settings
- Support drop-out recovery programs that are aligned with students' interests and reflect the demands of the economy
- Deep opportunities for youth to become prepared for living wage work and careers

- Dense networks of community supports that allow youth to develop all the dimensions of their lives (physical, social, creative, spiritual).

With this vision and framework for a system of youth services as a lens, an analysis of patterns of youth outcomes in the Triangle region reveals how far we are from the ideal and what efforts we should take to further prevent and remediate youth disconnection.



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Who and Where are the Triangle's Disconnected Youth?

Rates of youth disconnection vary widely across the Triangle. In 2005, Wake County had nearly 52 percent² of the 15-24 population in the region; Durham, 18 percent; and Orange, 13 percent. Person, Johnston, Franklin, and Chatham Counties account for the balance. Yet the factors that contribute to disconnection do not track population distribution. Youth in the Durham Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA—Durham, Orange, Person, and Chatham counties) and in Durham County in particular have higher rates of poverty and unemployment and a lower four-year graduation rate—all factors related to higher rates of disconnection.

Race and Poverty: Nearly 50 percent of the youth population in Durham County is either African American or Latino, compared with 31 percent in Wake, 41 percent in Franklin, 33 percent in Person, and 28 percent in Chatham, which has the highest percentage of Latino youth in the region. The estimated youth poverty rate in the Durham MSA was 29 percent in 2005, far outstripping the Raleigh MSA at 19 percent. Durham's rates of youth poverty exceed both North Carolina (23 percent) and the US (19 percent) and a high concentration of Durham's poor youth live in neighborhoods of extreme poverty and unemployment which reinforce the challenge of staying on a sound developmental path. The combination of racial demographics and

higher rates of poverty make Durham's youth particularly prone to disconnection.

A fall 2007 report of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation underscores the power of poverty to frustrate educational success and persistence, even for high-achieving students:

- Even before they enter first grade, lower-income high achievers are off to a bad start. Only 28 percent of students in the top quarter of their first grade class are from lower-income families, while 72 percent come from higher-income families.
- From first to fifth grade, nearly half of the lower-income students in the top 25 percent of their class in reading fell out of this rank.

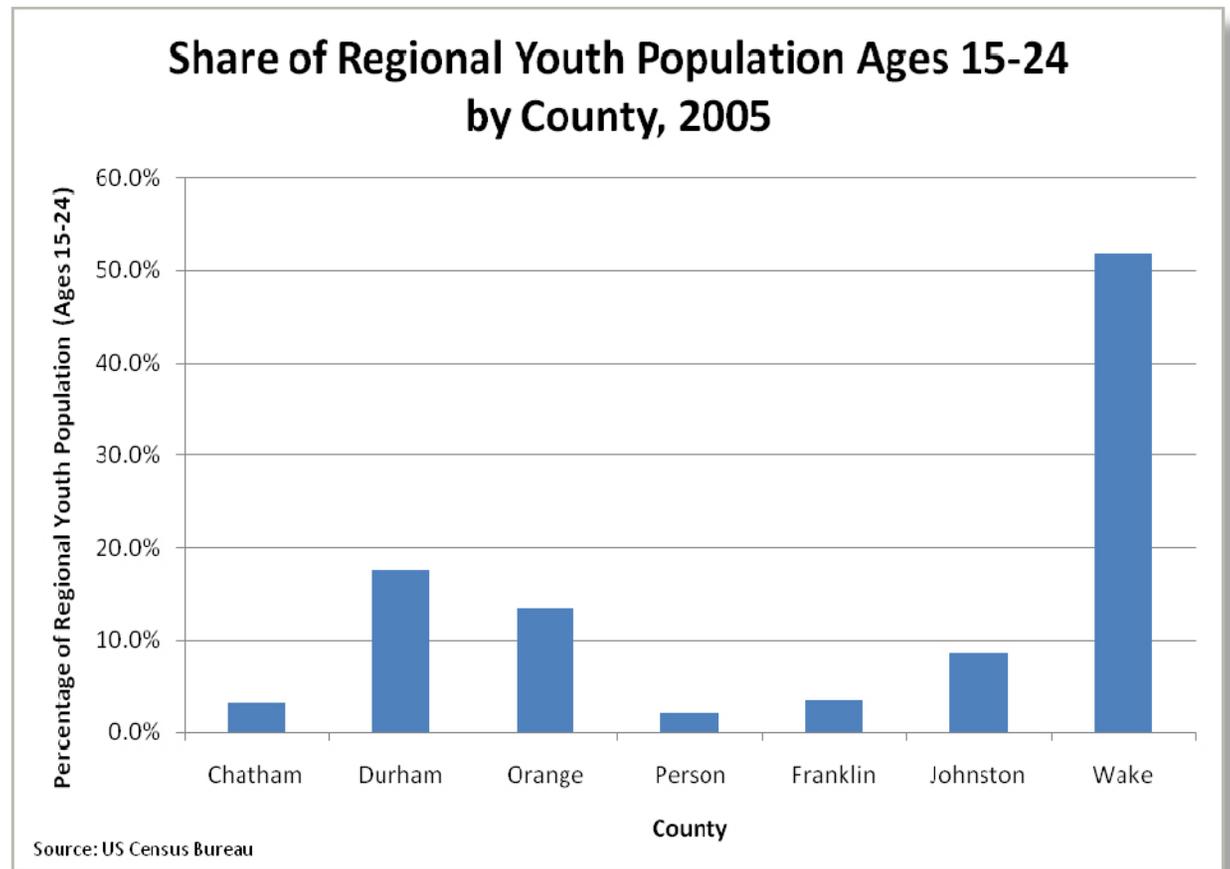
² All data are from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2005 American Community Survey unless otherwise noted.

- In high school, one quarter of the lower-income students who ranked in the top 25 percent of their class in eighth grade math fell out of this top ranking by twelfth grade.
- In both cases, upper-income students maintain their places in the top quartile of achievement at significantly higher rates than lower-income students.

Educational Attainment and Persistence:

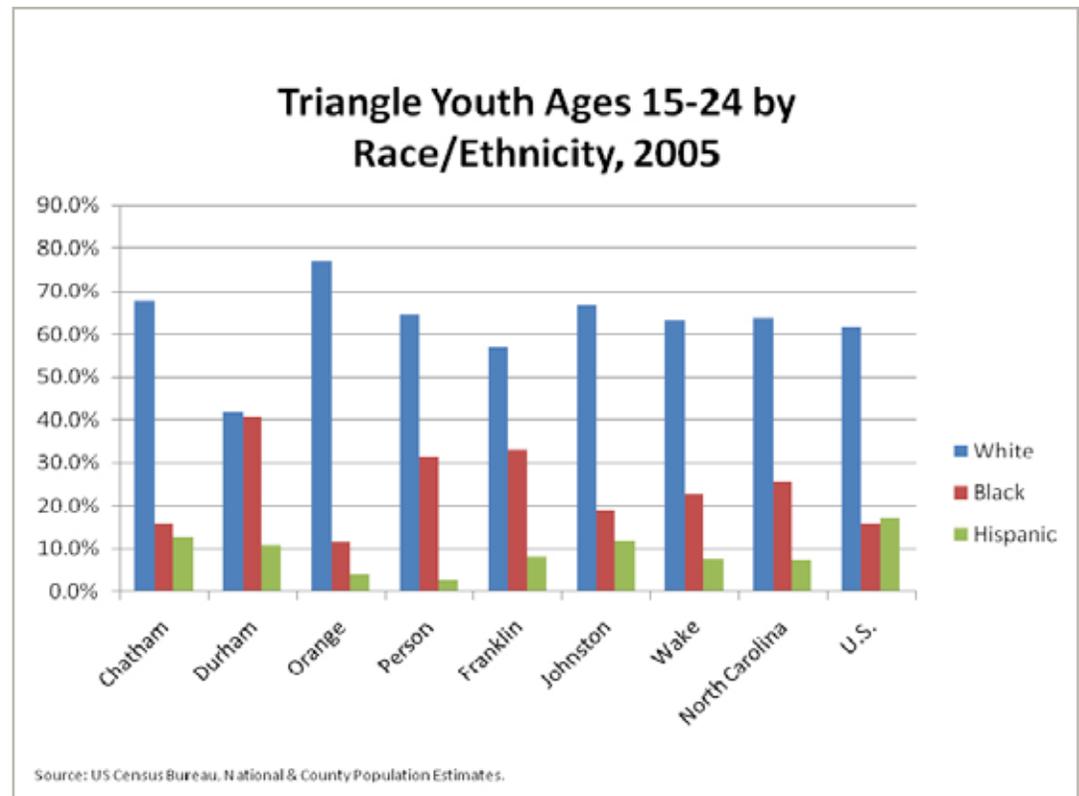
Among the Triangle counties with the largest population of young people, retention rates are highest in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro and Wake County systems and significantly lower in Durham and Orange county public schools.³ The U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey estimates that nearly 10 percent of Durham County youth between the ages of 15 and 17 were not enrolled in school in 2005, compared with 3 percent in Wake County and 6 percent in North Carolina overall. Wake and Durham counties had approximately the same number of out-of-school adolescents—800—in 2004-5, but Wake County’s population of 15 to 17 year-olds is three times that of Durham, making the incidence of out-of-school youth in Durham a much more pronounced problem.

Figure 2



Labor Market Connection: Youth unemployment rates are dramatically higher in the Durham MSA than in Raleigh. For the 16-19 age group the 2005 unemployment rate was estimated at 31 percent in the Durham MSA compared with 14 percent in Raleigh. For the 20-24 age cohort the gap was 13 percent in Durham versus 9 percent in Raleigh.⁴ For both age cohorts, the rate of youth unemployment in the Durham MSA was higher than both the North Carolina and the U.S. average. Most recently, May 2008 U.S. youth unemployment was 18.7 percent⁵ (compared to an overall unemployment rate of 5.5 percent), which underscores the difficulty that all young people, particularly those who may not have completed their education, face in the modern economy. The figures for the Durham MSA may reflect the additional hardships that African-American and Latino youth, particularly under-educated and poorly skilled youth, face in the labor market.⁶

Figure 3



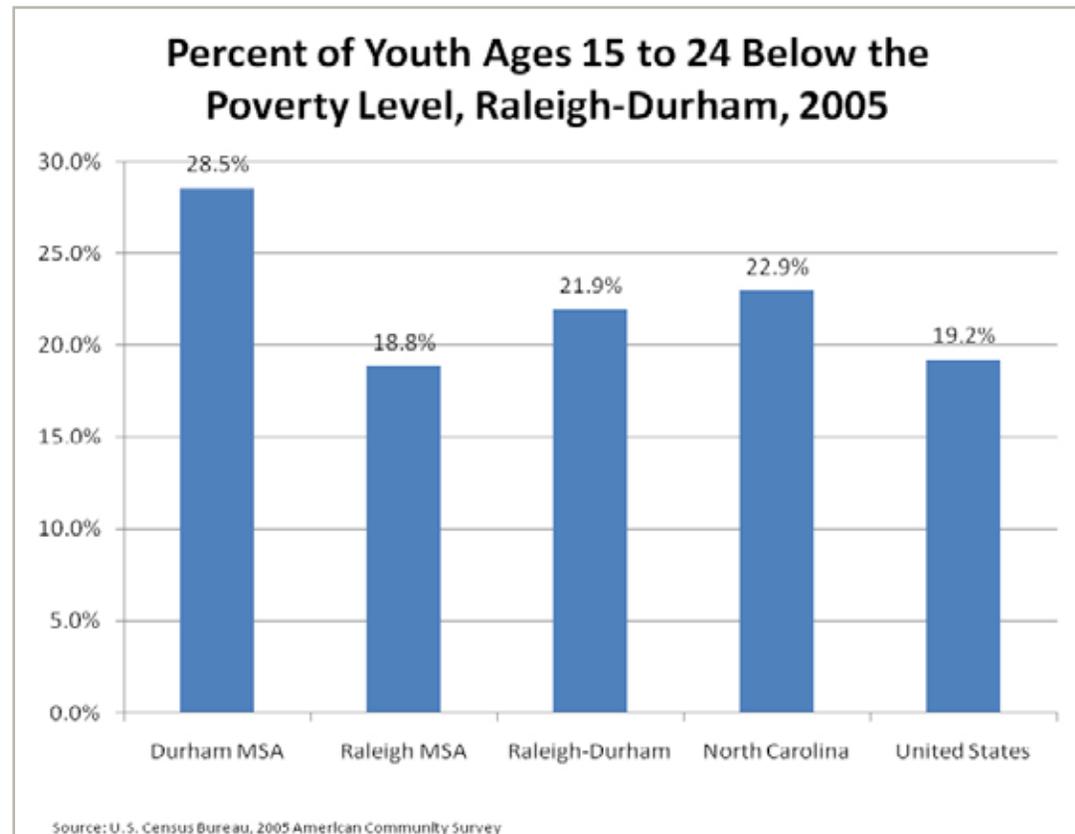
⁴ Younger teenagers often have higher rates of unemployment than older teens due to their involvement in school. However, this does not mean that all youth will naturally “age out of” high unemployment. Disconnected youth by definition often interrupt education prematurely, becoming ill equipped for many jobs and more likely to experience a higher unemployment rate as an adult (Wald and Martinez).

⁵ Civilian non-institutional population ages 16-19. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008.

⁶ The poverty and unemployment statistics cited here are calculated using the 2006 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau. The estimates are projections based upon a small survey sample. There may be a significant degree of error associated with some of these projections.

Violent Crime: Rates for violent crime among youth 16-19 in Durham and Person Counties are particularly high (6.6 and 9.7 incidents per 1000 respectively), well exceeding the North Carolina and Triangle averages (5.2 and 3.6 per 1000). Property crime among youth 16-19 is also higher in Durham than elsewhere in the region (23 versus 18 percent). Both Durham County and the region show lower rates of property crime for youth 16-19 than North Carolina as a whole. Surprisingly, Person County leads the region in the prevalence of violent crime and property crime for youth 15-19 and 19-24. The connection between criminal behavior and interrupted education is logical and clear. According to one Durham County district court judge, approximately half of the adults who show up in criminal court there are high school dropouts.

Figure 4

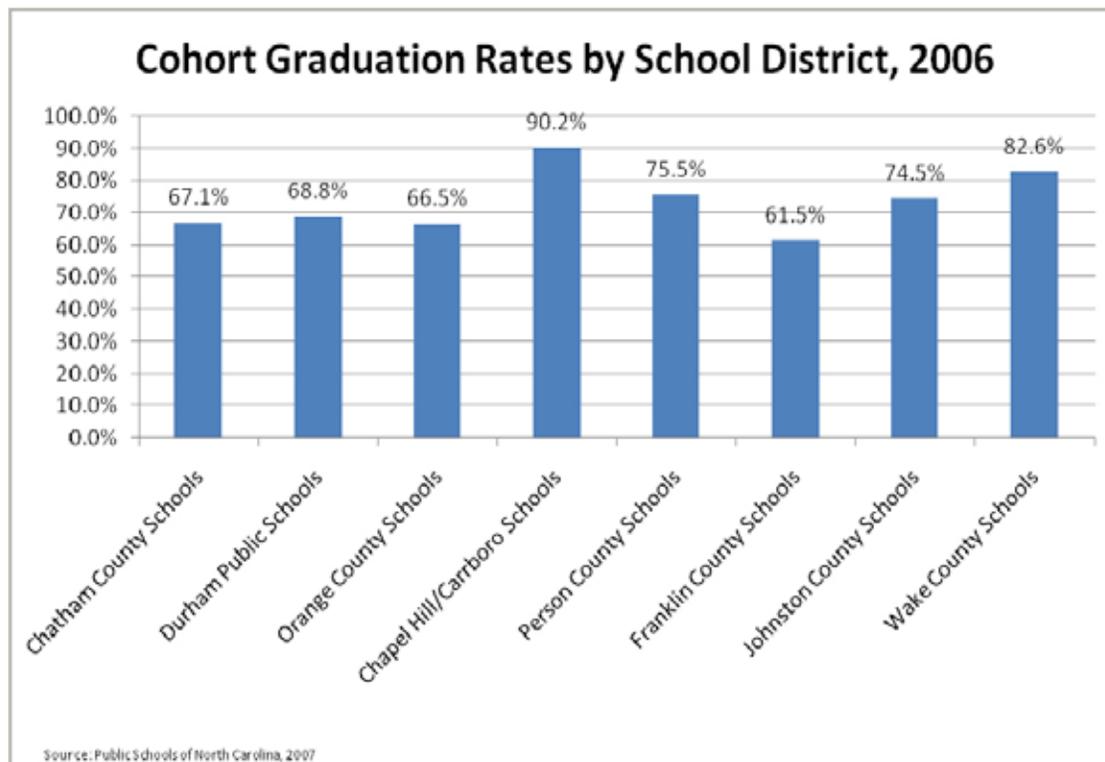


Falling Short of the Vision

Thus the state of youth in the Triangle is not monolithic, and the potential for youth disconnection is far from uniform. Youth in the

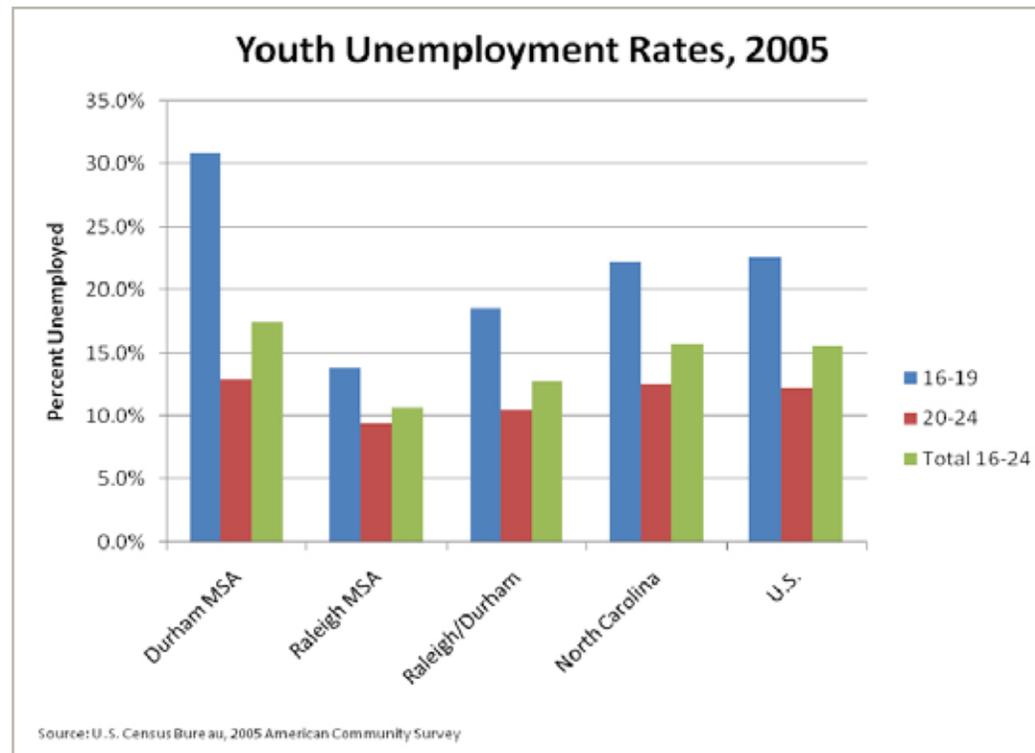
Raleigh MSA appear to be faring better than their Durham MSA peers (and especially their Durham County peers) on several indicators that contribute to disconnection. Youth in Durham County are more likely to be poor, out of school, and not working. In addition, while recent figures on youth unemployment are not available for specific counties in the Triangle, it is reasonable to surmise that youth in the “halo” counties around Wake and Durham who have not completed high school or its equivalent encounter high levels of frustration and failure in the limited rural labor market. For youth who come from demographically vulnerable groups and high poverty circumstances and who choose to leave school prematurely, reality falls tragically short of the vision inspired by the principles of positive youth development. These young people are on a fast track toward disconnection in the midst of a region of prosperity and promise.

Figure 5



For youth who come from demographically vulnerable groups and high poverty circumstances and who choose to leave school prematurely, reality falls tragically short of the vision inspired by the principles of positive youth development. These young people are on a fast track toward disconnection in the midst of a region of prosperity and promise.

Figure 6



A Framework for Strategic Action

In 2005, The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families of the National League of Cities produced an excellent guide for municipal leaders entitled “Reengaging Disconnected Youth.” The report is a model of clarity. It offers three broad strategic goals and a set of subsidiary objectives to guide action and investment. MDC uses the “Reengaging Disconnected Youth” framework as a template for our review of the current state of the Triangle’s response to youth disconnection and for recommendations for further action.

Goal One: Promote Educational Attainment

Disconnected youth fall into two categories: those who are in school, struggling, and at high risk of dropping out and those who have dropped out and need to complete their education. As the data above indicate, the Durham MSA and Durham County in particu-

lar have a serious problem with out-of-school youth that demands prompt remediation.

The “Reengaging Disconnected Youth” framework lists four strategies for promoting educational attainment for vulnerable young people: Combat Truancy, Alternative Learning Options, Community Strategies for High School Completion, and College Access for Non-Traditional Students. Here we examine how the Triangle is performing in each of these key areas.

Strategy: Combat Truancy. Several people MDC interviewed cited addressing truancy as a critical early strategy in preventing disconnection. Truancy reduction is the explicit focus of Durham County’s promising Truancy Court, a school-based model that gets the justice system, school officials, and families to intervene once a student begins skip-

ping school. Pioneered in Louisville, Ky., and in place in Mecklenburg County as well, the program now operates at all Durham middle schools, several high schools, and pilot inner-city elementary schools. The court helps students and families address scheduling, academic, and behavioral barriers to school attendance. All students who have missed six days of school without a valid excuse are given the opportunity to appear in truancy court; approximately 15 percent elect to participate. Initial results are encouraging. At Chewning Middle School, Durham's pilot truancy court site, the program reduced truancy rates by 40 percent the first year and by another 50 percent in the second year. The court has also stimulated policy reform. Durham has changed bus routes and schedules so that students can get to school on time and is exploring the need to integrate public transit and school bus systems. All Durham students with a "C" average or lower are now assigned to an after-school program, and after-school programs are now present in all Durham middle schools. Nevertheless, despite its success, Durham Truancy court remains small in scale. Partici-

pation is voluntary. "Truancy is a Class One misdemeanor," said one judge. The truancy system doesn't give us much leverage over juveniles to change their behavior." Moreover, the court deals only indirectly with the fact that chronically truant students often live in families where adults juggle multiple jobs, have erratic schedules, and give youth little oversight. "We could do a lot by giving families alarm clocks" notes former District Court Judge Craig Brown of Durham.

Recently, the Truancy Triage Center began operating in Durham to provide assessment and referral to students who have been truant. Referred by many sources, including Truancy Court, youth and their families receive assessments in mental health, substance abuse, reading, and math, and develop an individualized plan for reengaging in school. The center also serves as a portal for brokering services to address significant personal and family issues such as medical, psychological, and social concerns that may be preventing the child's success.

Strategy: Alternative Learning Options.

Too many youth in the Triangle find school disengaging, irrelevant, or confining. High school retention rates tell part of the story. They are higher than they should be across the Triangle region and particularly distressing in Durham. Nearly 900 students in Wake County are on long-term suspension, mostly for behavior infractions. In Durham County, 600 students are estimated to be suspended or expelled annually from the public schools, placing them in a limbo status from which few ever fully recover.⁷ The Chapel Hill-Carrboro school system has a relatively low rate of student suspensions. It operates a community-based alternative to suspension, Project Boomerang, through the YMCA. Project Boomerang provides student support and counseling and advocates on behalf of youth in the community, with the goal of helping young people at risk of disconnection become more resilient and successful.

In the best of worlds, students who fail to profit from a conventional school environment would have the option of choosing an alternative school setting. In the Triangle,

⁷ David Dodson interview with Durham school official, February 2007. This official further observed, "When it comes to troubled youth, No Child Left Behind is an ambiguous policy. On the one hand, principals don't want disruptive kids in their schools. On the other hand, NCLB requires schools to educate every child. No one has figured out how to use NCLB as a carrot rather than a stick."

however, the menu of alternatives is distressingly thin for students who are deeply disengaged, prone to dropping out, or suspended from conventional schools.

Nationally, the public school landscape is brimming with a wide diversity of inventive alternatives to the traditional middle and high school. There are “small” high schools whose intimate scale promotes stronger faculty-student contact, making it less likely that students will feel anonymous and disconnected. There are high schools with a thematic or vocational focus that help students relate learning to real-world interests, sometimes gaining a post-secondary credential at the same time as a diploma. There are charter schools that emphasize curricular innovation, often tailored to the cultures and communities in which students live, at times involving flexible hours and new technology. All are potential tools for keeping students engaged and in school.

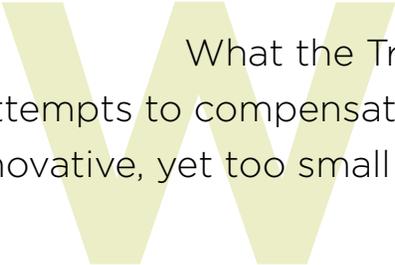
Yet, the overriding conclusion to be drawn from examining alternative learning options in the Triangle is that they are few in number and inadequate in reach. Wake County has

one alternative middle school and three alternative high schools with a total of 500 seats. School officials acknowledge that this number has been static for a decade and that the system could use twice as many seats. Wake has, however, taken steps to make the high school experience more personalized, reorganizing many of its 9th grade classes into “academies” where students are assigned to their own section of the school with their own teachers and counselors. Durham’s “alternative” high school—Lakeview—serves suspended students, not students in good standing who require an alternative learning environment. Wake, Durham, Orange, Chatham, and Person counties each have one charter school serving high-school age students, but most Triangle charters cluster in the early grades, leaving their graduates little choice but to matriculate into conventional middle and high schools. In addition, not all of these charter schools serve at-risk youth.

Both Durham and Wake have “early college” high schools that combine the last two years of high school with the first two years of college. Early colleges, like the Josephine Clement Early College at NCCU in Durham,

target high-potential students who find traditional high school education unmotivating. Yet as important as they are, early colleges as implemented in North Carolina are not designed to address the multiple challenges posed by disconnected youth.

The absence of rich alternatives at the middle and high school level is particularly ominous given the perfect storm of public policy and institutional practice that swirls around many youth at risk of disconnection. North Carolina law allows public school students to end their education at age 16. Some North Carolina community colleges do not enroll youth below the age of 18 except in GED programs, which require applicants to test in at a 9th grade level. This discretionary practice can leave youth between the ages of 16 and 18 who leave school functioning below the 9th grade level in a “no-man’s-land” without educational moorings, eligible to leave high school but ineligible to complete their schooling in community college. Not surprisingly, experts interviewed in Wake and Durham consider youth aged 16-18 with literacy levels below the 9th grade level to be most vulnerable to disconnection. For



What the Triangle lacks in formal alternative schooling options it attempts to compensate for through community programs. Many of these programs are innovative, yet too small in scale to provide a systemic response to youth disconnection.

these underperforming dropouts, the way forward to school completion, further educational attainment, and reconnection is murky at best. The most motivated and fortunate might connect to one of a number of community programs that focus on raising youth skills to the threshold required for the GED, then continuing that education to obtain a further credential.⁸ The vast majority face a future where idleness and gang involvement become seductive options.

Strategy: Community Strategies for High School Completion.

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in scale to provide a systemic response to youth disconnection.

MDC's survey of Triangle-area programs to prevent and respond to youth disconnection revealed dense activity in Durham (Attachment Two). Several of the major programmatic domains needed to address disconnection—alternative education, mentoring, and rehabilitation and reconnection—are available in Durham and other Triangle communities, primarily for high-school aged youth and young adults. Among the most notable are:

- **Alternative Education.** The YMCA in Chapel Hill operates a community-based alternative to suspension, **Boomerang**, which provides support and counseling to students and advocates on behalf of youth

in the community. Students participating in Boomerang have the opportunity to stay on pace with their school work, engage in skill building and information group sessions, and are provided the space to voice their goals to staff, parents/guardians, and school representatives. The goal is to help young people at-risk of disconnection become more resilient and successful. Until 2007, Durham—with a far lower rate of high school persistence than Wake and many more youth prone to disconnection—had no true alternative middle or high school. **Communities in Schools** of Durham has now opened the **Performance Learning Center** (PLC), a nationally recognized model that provides a non-traditional environment for high-school aged youth to

⁸ Although the disparity in wages earned between those with a GED and a high school diploma has been already documented, a vast majority of dropouts obtain GEDs compared to diplomas (National Educational Longitudinal Study).

graduate with a high school diploma. Students complete assignments at their own pace using an online computer-based curriculum. Approximately 100 students are in the PLC; however, there are many more students in the community who would benefit if the program were larger.

- **Mentoring and After-School Programming.** **Boys and Girls Clubs** in Wake and Durham have a mission of helping youth prone to disconnection stay on a path to successful adulthood. **The John Avery Boys Club** in Durham, with a long history of deep service in the African-American community, works actively with the Durham Literacy Council and other community groups to reach youth on the cusp of disconnection and gang involvement. Durham's **Partners for Youth** (PFY) provides middle school and high school youth in Southwest Central Durham with wrap-around mentoring to help them succeed in school, understand the workplace, and navigate the path to adulthood. PFY works with only 25 students per year, and because of the intimacy and deep support that characterize the program, participants go to college and avoid the pitfalls of gang involvement and

teen pregnancy at remarkable levels.

- **Rehabilitation and Reconnection.** Rehabilitation and reconnection programs help disconnected youth change destructive behaviors and resume their education. The **Tarheel Challenge Academy** is a rigorous residential “boot camp” based in Sampson County that helps dropouts or expelled youth with behavioral problems and low motivation (but not drug convictions) earn a GED. The program begins with a six-month residential phase that emphasizes completion of a high school diploma or a GED certificate and a range of other activities and support services, followed by a one-year, post-residential phase in which participants are assigned to a mentor in the community. Tarheel Challenge graduates also automatically qualify for the North Carolina National Guard, but there are no military service obligations associated with the program. Researchers have cited the Tarheel Challenge model as among the most effective at reconnecting African-American men, but both boys and girls of all races have found the program transformational. Congressman David Price, local jurists, and other leaders hope to create a

second Tarheel Challenge site in Butner to serve the Triangle. The cost per student is approximately \$16,000 and is underwritten 75 percent by the federal government and 25 percent by the state. The **Achievement Academy** is a small but promising Durham-based program that helps youth and adults earn the GED and continue their education at Durham Technical Community College. It emphasizes deep, personalized attention to young people who need active academic and life coaching. Durham's **Martina Dunford**, known in the community as “**Coach D**”, is celebrated for her tough-love ability to get gang members to turn around their lives. Having operated several community-based reconnection programs, some in collaboration with the Durham Schools, Coach D is in the process of developing a vocationally centered charter school focused on disconnected youth and young adults.

As promising and necessary as these programs are, they—and others like them—are often small, habitually underfunded, stretched in their staffing, and outmatched by the circumstances they are trying to address. Small scale and intimacy can be a vir-

tue, especially as a counterpoint to schools that can strike youth as alienating. But a radically decentralized, largely nonprofit infrastructure is not the best way for a region to respond to a problem that is complex and systemic. At present the Triangle is asking heroic community programs to compensate for public systems that do not have the supports necessary to ensure at-risk youth graduate from high school. This is not a sustainable solution.

Strategy: College Access, Persistence, and Retention for Non-Traditional Students.

The ultimate challenge facing the Triangle is to help disconnected youth earn post-secondary credentials that are the key to success in the modern economy. **Durham Technical Community College** participates in **Breaking Through**, an innovative national program designed to help low-literacy adults persist toward community college degrees. Because many adults and young adults do not acquire a further credential once obtaining Adult Basic Education, this program develops pathways to higher wage work for young adults that have dropped out of school. Breaking Through emphasizes program innovation and organizational reforms

to help colleges increase success rates for low-literacy adults, along with enriched support to help students overcome challenges they encounter. Together with programs like Durham's Achievement Academy, Breaking Through is constructing an important stepping stone to post-secondary success for struggling but committed young adults. Durham Technical Community College is also one of four North Carolina community colleges participating in **Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count**, a national effort to increase the rate at which low-income students and students of color earn community college degrees and certificates. Achieving the Dream has the potential to consolidate and extend the reforms being piloted in programs such as the Achievement Academy and Breaking Through.

Goal Two: Develop Workforce Connections

For the Triangle's youth to become successful, contributing adults, educational attainment must lead to productive, living-wage work. The "Reengaging Disconnected Youth" framework urges four strategies for connecting youth to the economy: work opportunities for in-school youth, transitional jobs for

out-of-school youth, expanded access to entry-level jobs, and workforce policy reforms. Apart from the occasional small-scale community program or pilot effort, however, MDC's scan of the region failed to surface any significant activity in any of these areas. In part, the absence of attention to issues of youth employment and workforce preparation reflects a lamentable decline in national attention to and investment in these areas. Yet the local picture also reflects the need for strong leadership and public awareness to connect youth, particularly youth vulnerable to disconnection, to the productive economy. Around the country a handful of progressive communities have dedicated themselves to developing workforce competency among disconnected youth, undeterred by the lack of national commitment. These communities are models for what the Triangle could achieve.

Strategy: Work Opportunities for In-School Youth.

No Triangle community has a sustained, vigorous program to give in-school youth a taste of work experience, either paid or volunteer. In both Raleigh and Durham, federal Workforce Investment Act funds are available to support employment slots in the low hundreds, far less than the

level of need. The Durham Mayor's Summer Work Program provided about 300 jobs in summer 2008, but disconnected youth may struggle to qualify. Private sector employment options for disconnected or disadvantaged youth are scant. Durham's Partners for Youth, whose students are inner-city high achievers, reports that it could not find paid work experience for the majority of its participants in the summer of 2006. If exemplary youth such as those in PFY are unable to secure summer employment, it is fair to assume the situation is much worse for the teens who are struggling in the Triangle. In 2007, **Durham Congregations in Action** took a step to provide the needed linkage between businesses and youth, creating YO: Durham, a year-long program of career and academic mentoring for youth ages 15 and above. Based on a highly successful transitional jobs program in Boston, YO: Durham features a paid 36-week internship for all participants.⁹ Support for YO: Durham is provided by congregations, corporations, and the Durham Chamber of Commerce.

Strategy: Transitional Jobs for Out-of-School Youth. Out-of-school youth often need to complete their high school education while gaining work experience. The **Youth-Build** program, a national program funded by HUD and in place in both Wake and Durham counties, trains high school dropouts in construction skills, helps them earn the GED, and then puts them to work rehabilitating housing in their communities. Both rigorous and practical, YouthBuild positions disconnected youth to benefit from a growing sector of the legitimate economy. Other communities have used their YouthBuild springboard for revitalized youth employment programs for disconnected youth. The Triangle's YouthBuild programs operate in relative obscurity, remaining small-scale pilots instead of catalysts for deeper investments in workforce development for youth. Durham's **TROSA**, a national model for rehabilitation and employment training for substance abusers, has created a portfolio of highly successful businesses that provide work experience to its participants. TROSA'S model for hands-on employment training could potentially provide Triangle communi-

ties with transferable lessons for helping disconnected youth build marketable skills and turn their lives around.

Strategy: Expand Access to Entry-Level Jobs and Career Ladders. The Triangle's research-based, knowledge-driven economy makes it increasingly difficult for disconnected youth to gain ground-level employment without formal assistance. Those that can acquire these jobs may then find them difficult to keep. Nationally, foundations and nonprofit workforce and regional development organizations are beginning to collaborate to build "intermediary" structures to provide aspiring low-skill workers the literacy and soft skills that employers demand in entry-level workers. Some of these organizations ensure that there is a clear pathway for workers to progress into jobs with more seniority and pay ("career ladders"). These intermediaries function as community employment agencies, certifying that workers can meet basic standards and removing some of the hiring risk from employers. While the Triangle has few such intermediaries, it does have a branch of the **Center for Em-**

⁹ YO: Boston's multi-year transitional jobs program begins with volunteer internships in the first year, followed by subsidized private sector employment and ultimately market-wage employment for participants who demonstrate progress and commitment in the program. The program has been in place for over ten years, funded by public and private sector grants.

The Triangle's research-based, knowledge-driven economy makes it increasingly difficult for disconnected youth to gain ground-level employment without formal assistance. Those that can acquire these jobs may then find them difficult to keep. Nationally, foundations and nonprofit workforce and regional development organizations are beginning to collaborate to build "intermediary" structures to provide aspiring low-skill workers the literacy and soft skills that employers demand in entry-level workers.

ployment Training, a respected San Antonio-based model workforce intermediary that helps under-skilled and novice workers. In addition, MDC itself has a long history of supporting the development of community-level workforce intermediaries in the South. MDC has served as project staff for Connecting People to Jobs, which created intermediaries in Columbia, S.C., Charlottesville, Va., and Charleston, W.Va., with investment from the Babcock and Annie E. Casey Foundations. MDC also designed and manages **Latino Pathways**, designed to move low-skill, documented Latino workers into living-wage jobs in high-demand sectors in Greensboro and Charlotte. Both these programs create civic partnerships composed of employers, training providers, community organization rep-

resentatives, and elected officials to design new training programs, build employer support, increase public and private investment in workforce preparation for low-skill people, and advocate policy change.

Strategy: Change Workforce Policies. Often, workforce policies at the national, state, and municipal levels as well as in most private sector firms do not place high priority on preparing youth for success in the labor market. The Workforce Investment Act authorizes regional Workforce Investment Boards to utilize federal funds to strengthen youth employment for disconnected or disadvantaged youth, and some communities have changed their workforce policies to innovate, blending public and private resources to develop

comprehensive systems for youth services. For example, Baltimore's Workforce Investment Board Youth Council set a goal to build a comprehensive youth system and establish a viable advocacy committee to address policy, sustainability, and marketing of that system. The city then allowed youth enrolled in the public school system to be served by education providers other than the school system, and the One-Stop system negotiated funding and education services with the schools. Youth then were able to enroll in a non-traditional career academy high school, and both the high school and One-Stop were able to sustain the service. The school system, in return, could claim another successful graduate.

Goal Three: Support Youth in Transition

Given the absence of vigorous, well-integrated efforts to help troubled youth regain their footing, the criminal justice system has become society's default response to chronic disconnection both nationally and in the Triangle. African-American males in particular have such high rates of criminal justice involvement that in many states, including North Carolina, the number of African-American youth in prison is nearly as great as the number in post-secondary education.¹⁰ A criminal record not only derails progress toward a constructive adulthood, it often dashes the possibility of employment, especially in certain high-growth sectors such as health care, where regular patient or client contact is required. Reengaging Disconnected Youth recommends three strategies to help youth avoid or recover from the stain of involvement with the criminal justice system: provide alternatives to criminal prosecution, reconnect young adults with criminal records to education and employment, and reform policy.

Strategy: Provide Alternatives to

Criminal Prosecution. Truancy courts, drug treatment courts, and mental health courts are important vehicles for addressing criminal and status offenses by youth behavior before they result in conviction. Truancy and drug treatment courts operate in Durham and Wake Counties. North Carolina's only mental health court—the **Community Resource Court**—operates in Orange County. All emphasize counseling and behavior modification as alternatives to prosecution. In Durham an innovative partnership between the schools and courts attempts to intervene early in the cycle of youth violence to reorient problematic youth behavior and prevent court involvement. Established in 2000, **A New Day Juvenile Day Reporting Center** serves youth ages 12 to 16 who have been suspended from middle or high school. Participants are often gang-involved, violent, and abusers of drugs and alcohol. A New Day combines deep therapeutic counseling with standard academic instruction, peer mentoring, and parental coaching to create an environment of support, accountability, and rigorous expectations. The program enrolls

slightly more than 100 youth annually, and completion rates of the therapeutic regimen at the heart of the program have ranged as high as 70 percent. With their behavioral problems under control, participants stand a better chance of persisting toward graduation and avoiding destructive temptations. A New Day has now become the basis for the Last Stop program, which helps youth and young adults referred by adult probation, juvenile justice, and pre-trial services earn the GED Youth who have not been involved with the justice system may also participate. The program has enrolled 18 students since beginning in June 2007.

Strategy: Reconnect Youth with Criminal

Records. A criminal record is too often an insurmountable obstacle for youth seeking reconnection to productive society. Raleigh's **Passage Home**, a community development and housing agency, operates **Harriet's House**, a transitional housing and support program for women ex-offenders. The 24-month program helps participants gain full-time employment, set life goals, reunite with their families, and often complete post-

¹⁰ MDC, Inc., State of the South, 2004.

secondary education. With a completion rate of 85 percent and a recidivism rate of 15 percent, the program is among the most successful of its kind in the country. Durham County's **Project Restore** helps ex-offenders gain carpentry and construction skills and use them to rehabilitate housing for needy residents of the community. The 12-week program is open to newly released prisoners and adults on probation and offers participants a weekly stipend and helps them link to jobs after graduation. Both these programs are small scale. Personalized support for participants is a key measure of their effectiveness.

Strategy: Policy Reform. Public policy can have the unintended consequence of increasing youth disconnection. For instance, North Carolina's rate of student suspension was 45 percent higher than the national average in 2005.¹¹ Fervent implementation of "zero tolerance," "one strike" policies can create a fast track toward disconnection, especially when school districts lack a strong safety net of alternative school options, as is the case in the Triangle. An analysis of North Carolina suspension rates by race shows that African

American and Native American students bear the brunt of suspensions and that suspension patterns for all students double between fifth and sixth grades and peak at the start of high school in ninth grade. Within the Triangle, suspension rates are lowest for all races in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro-Schools and highest for all races in Johnston County.¹²

Pushed by advocates to lower the suspension rate, some North Carolina districts, including Wake, Durham, and Chapel Hill-Carrboro, have instituted promising structural reforms (9th grade academies in Wake), deep training of classroom personnel (Durham), and special academic support centers for students with low End of Grade test performance and other learning challenges (Chapel Hill-Carrboro). Continued research and advocacy will be required to make certain that policies designed to promote school discipline do not have the unintended consequence of increasing the rate of school disconnection. Organizations such as **Action for Children North Carolina**, **North Carolina Justice Center**, and the **Center for Civil Rights** at UNC-Chapel Hill can be important allies in this quest.

¹¹ Action for Children North Carolina, 2006.

¹² http://www.ncchild.org/images/stories/Short-Term_Suspensions;_Long-Term_Consequences;_Real_Life_Solutions.pdf

Goal Four: Develop City/ Region-Wide Systems

Youth disconnection is a complex problem that requires the reform and redesign of community systems and the engagement of civic leadership. How communities and regions organize themselves to tackle the challenges of disconnection can have a profound effect on the success of their interventions. Today, many of the Triangle's responses to youth disconnection, while valiant and creative, are themselves disconnected, poorly integrated, inadequately aligned, and under-resourced. The absence of mechanisms to help small community programs reach scale, work together, leverage investment, and influence policy reform stunts the impact of the good work now being done. Programs have limited impact because they will by nature only be able to serve a fraction of the youth that need the services; systemic reform is needed to make a community impact as large numbers of youth touch these systems. The recent joint award to Wake and Durham counties of a \$2.5 million federal grant for gang prevention and suppression may offer an incentive to cross-county cooperation if carefully managed and implemented to foster agency and system collaboration.

In 2005 the **Youth Transitions Funders Group**, a consortium of foundations, provided incentive funding to five communities to focus and align their leadership and resources to address disconnection. Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Portland, and San Jose each convened representatives from the education, government, and human services sectors to analyze the dimensions of disconnection, frame goals, define high-leverage investments to increase educational options for out-of-school youth, and create lasting cross-discipline partnerships to guide program innovation, systems reform, and policy change. The results have been heightened recognition of the youth disconnection problem, the identification and repair of policy and program gaps, rededicated and increased public and private investment in innovative programs, and new collaborative relationships across sectors (see profiles of Boston, San Jose, and Portland in Attachment One).

The experience of the Youth Transitions Funders Group provides important lessons for other communities. YTFG communities typically vested leadership in organizations or coalitions with strong public credibility

and the capacity to advocate policy reform. They grounded their decisions in rigorous, data-based analysis of demographic trends and program performance. They focused on building community systems rather than proliferating programs, creating common points of entry and mechanisms to track youth progress.

The **Harlem Children's Zone** represents another unique approach to aligning systems and resources at a scale required to address and prevent chronic youth disconnection. Public entrepreneur and youth advocate Geoffrey Canada has raised \$50 million to create the Zone in order to apply the best known ideas for youth development in a deeply distressed community. Organized along the principle that "poor children can succeed if they receive middle-class support," the Zone provides a rich concentration of alternative learning, career exploration, after-school programming, and college counseling to children and youth from a 60-square block portion of central Harlem. Programs draw on research-based models that have demonstrated their effectiveness. Standards and outcomes are high: a successful transition to a productive adulthood is the



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goal for all participating youth. The Zone aims to demonstrate that tough neighborhoods and challenging surroundings do not have to derail progress for economically disadvantaged youth.

Six years ago the **Jessie Ball DuPont Fund** of Jacksonville, Florida, began an impressive effort to strengthen nonprofit capacity to improve outcomes for youth in the community. The Fund observed that many local youth programs were struggling to make a lasting difference on the deep problems facing young people in the community. Instead of taking the conventional path of funding local groups to do more of the same programs, the DuPont Fund created a \$5 million **Community Building Fund** to help youth organizations develop wiser programs. Managed by the local community foundation, the Commu-

nity Building Fund made “reflective practice” grants to enable youth organizations to engage in a year of learning and reflection about what works to change the lives of young people. Organizations received funding to visit and learn from exemplary national programs, explore and apply the principles of positive youth development, engage in peer learning as a first step toward inter-agency collaboration, restructure their staffing and governance to increase effectiveness, and build deeper relationships with the communities they served. The result has been a renaissance in innovation and collaboration across the community as nearly 100 organizations now have the knowledge and capacity to address youth problems more creatively. The Jacksonville region now has a well-aligned youth-serving infrastructure better positioned for transformational impact. The Pew

Charitable Trusts and Annie E. Casey Foundations are among the prominent national funders now making first-time investments in youth development in Jacksonville because of the community’s new capacity.

Recommendations For Action

The challenge of disconnected youth in the Triangle region poses numerous opportunities for government, philanthropic, and business leadership. MDC sees five levels at which government, business, and philanthropy can focus attention and accelerate progress on the issue of youth disconnection.

1. Reframe the disconnected youth issue for the public, policy makers, business, and philanthropy.

How an issue is framed shapes the way it is discussed and addressed. At present, the Triangle has segmented the disconnected youth issue into popular categories that tell only part of the story: dropouts and gangs. As a result, public awareness and community investment are focused at two places in the continuum of youth development and disconnection: on educational reclamation and on pathological behaviors at the far end of the youth develop-

ment continuum. The current frame for discussing youth development and disconnection is not grounded in a comprehensive, animating vision of what youth deserve. Consequently, it fails to promote integrated solutions to a problem that is systemic and multi-dimensional.

Local government, business, and philanthropy have an opportunity to change the frame through which Triangle leaders and communities discuss and address youth disconnection by introducing the language, vision, and continuum of strategic responses laid out in this report. MDC recommends consideration of the following specific strategies:

- Brief county and municipal leaders in the region on the issues raised in this report. Include Chambers of Commerce and major local philanthropies such as the Triangle Community Foundation, A.J.

Fletcher Foundation, and Triangle Donors Forum.

- Take a lead role in helping them communicate and advocate the new framework in their circles of influence.
- Place op-eds in The News & Observer, Herald-Sun, and minority press summarizing the urgency of the issue and the specific findings and recommendations of this report.
- Seek additional mass media coverage and interviews on the report and its findings, particularly on WUNC and WNCU radio and WUNC-TV.

2. Create a region-wide conversation among practitioners, policy makers, and philanthropy to reinforce the disconnected youth framework and foster collaboration and alignment of effort.

The multiple Triangle agencies and programs now working on various facets of the disconnected youth issue seldom if ever gather to share strategies, align resources, and plan collaboratively. Local government, business, and philanthropy can provide important leadership by convening program innovators who work in

the strategy areas of the National League of Cities' "Reengaging Disconnected Youth" framework. MDC recommends:

- Convene a day-long invitational meeting of Triangle innovators with a stake in the disconnected youth issue.
- Focus the day on sharing the data and strategy framework in this report, lifting up local innovations in each strategic category, and identifying priorities for community investment and policy change.
- Produce a short report of proceedings and recommendations for community investment and policy reform.

3. Build the capacity of the community to address youth disconnection at greater depth and scale.

Many of the innovative community-based and public programs highlighted in this report are serving a limited number of youth due to capacity constraints. Intervening on a systems level, developing public and private partnerships, and ensuring youth have multiple options to obtain an education credential and job is more likely to produce changes in community outcomes. Funders can support capac-

ity building in several areas, including (but not limited to):

- Analysis to determine which questions are important to ask to understand the picture of disconnected youth in the community, and from which systems
- Data systems to capture the right information and report its information in meaningful ways to users; aligning data systems between public organizations when necessary
- Making policy decisions based on data
- Negotiating partnerships, joint programs, complicated funding streams, and tracking students through multiple programs

Funding is also a serious capacity issue, as many community programs exist on short-term, unreliable year-to-year government or foundation grants. Long-term success in addressing youth disconnection requires high-impact, sustainable funding from multiple sectors.

Success also requires that more of the region's youth organizations become capable of executing strategies based on proven national models. Business and philanthropy can exercise important lead-

ership by spurring the creation of a **Triangle Youth Reconnection Fund** modeled on the Jessie Ball DuPont's Jacksonville Community Building Fund. The Youth Reconnection Fund could provide seed and sustaining capital to proven programs and leverage investment from the growing number of national foundations interested in disconnected youth. The fund could also provide "reflective practice" grants and technical support to other community organizations whose help is needed to repair and prevent youth disconnection. Such investments could, in five years, invigorate and increase the Triangle's capacity to stem the tide of disconnected youth.

During the development of this report, MDC identified several local foundations and major individual donors with strong interest in disconnected youth. It is within the region's reach to create a significant pool of funding for innovation on the disconnected youth issue.

4. Develop and support the implementation of a policy reform agenda.

Policy reform in education, workforce development, criminal justice, transportation, and family support should be an integral part of any regional effort to address the disconnected youth challenge. MDC recommends that the foundation consider commissioning a roundtable of policy experts drawn from Action for Children North Carolina, North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, the UNC Center for Civil Rights, MDC, and innovative program practitioners to develop a policy reform agenda and advocacy strategy to address youth disconnection. The Triangle Youth Reconnection Fund could be charged with monitoring progress on the policy reform agenda.

Specifically, policy recommendations that might be considered include:

- Reporting the four-year cohort graduation rates to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee. Currently,

according to G.S. 115C-12(27), the committee receives an annual report on dropout events, although North Carolina has recently started reporting four-year cohort graduation rates. Since these graduation rates are often considered to be a more accurate picture of the dropout population, this information would improve understanding of the issue and provide for comparisons nationally.

- Supporting policy suggestions from the NC Center for Public Policy Research: "The N.C. Department of Public Instruction should consider revising and updating its school curricula by adding more real-world elements such as service learning, internships, and career exploration with an eye toward increasing the relevance of the curriculum and increasing the number of students who stay in school. The curriculum is currently weighted more toward college-bound students. Curricula and graduation requirements must be made relevant and meaningful to all students."

5. Cultivate employment opportunities for youth in the Triangle.

The dearth of adequate opportunities for Triangle youth to gain labor market exposure and experience is a glaring shortcoming in our region. Disconnected youth in particular are harmed by the absence of intentional youth employment strategies and policies. The experience of communities like Boston and Baltimore demonstrates that civic will and business leadership can create vigorous and sustainable programs that introduce and connect underserved youth to the legiti-

mate labor market. The Triangle's long-term health requires that we mount a similar effort. MDC recommends that business and philanthropy consider the following strategy:

- Support a study tour for regional policy makers, business leaders, and program innovators to Boston and/or Baltimore to learn the lessons and implications of successful city-wide youth employment efforts. Jobs for the Future and MDC could collaborate in organizing and staffing this study tour.

Attachment 1 Boston Compact

The Boston Compact is a flagship agreement that lays the foundation for school improvement and guarantees the commitment of business and higher education communities to Boston Public School (BPS) graduates.

The first Compact was signed in 1982. The original signatories agreed that the issues facing Boston at the time could not be addressed effectively without a successful public school system. The business and higher education communities believed that school improvement might be motivated if the external partners offered substantial commitment to students and graduates – in exchange for a unified commitment to school improvement from the superintendent, the School Committee and the Mayor. Through the Compact:

- The business community committed **summer jobs** and **priority hiring**.
- Higher education pledged **scholarships** and priority **admissions** for Boston graduates.
- The Boston schools committed to improve the schools as measured **by test scores, attendance, and a reduced drop-out rate**.

The Compact's **mutual accountability** arrangement — the contributions of each stakeholder are contingent upon the contributions of the others — was unique at the time. Equally unique was its commitment to **measurement**. The Private Industry Council (PIC) organized and reported summer jobs and graduate hiring. The Higher Education Partnership delivered scholarship commitments from various colleges and universities. The Boston Public Schools reported on attendance, drop-out rates, and test scores.

The original design required the Compact to be redrafted after five years, reflecting an understanding that key leadership changes over time. To date four Compact agreements have been signed.

The second Compact set the stage for school-based management and added Boston Teachers Union to the Steering Committee. The third Compact sought to restore the consensus for school reform that had evaporated amid budget crises and political struggles. In addition to launching various initiatives in pursuit of the defined goals, this Compact committed once again to emphasize measures of success through the **Com-**

pact Measurement Committee. As part of the launch of the third Compact, three new partners were added to the Compact Steering Committee — family service providers, parent organizations and arts and cultural organizations.

In 2000, the fourth Compact was signed, once again bringing together stakeholders around shared goals and accountability measures to improve opportunities for students. Leaders of Boston's business, higher education, cultural and human services communities, together with the School Department, the teachers union and the City committed to three goals:

1. Meet the “high standards” challenge.
2. Increase opportunities for college and career success.
3. Recruit and prepare the next generation of teachers and principals.

Portland Community College's “PCC Prep”

is a comprehensive program focused on helping dropouts to move as quickly as possible onto a pathway to a college credential.

As the operator of an alternative high school for dropouts in the early nineties, Oregon's

Portland Community College came face to face with two problems: few of its students were enrolling in the college upon graduation from the high school, and the school was receiving ongoing complaints — some substantiated, some not — from college faculty about teenagers disrupting the adult learning environment. This was troubling news for a school that sought to use the college environment as a more adult learning setting for high school dropouts. Rather than give up on dropouts, PCC devised a new approach that more effectively uses the college — and the promise of a college credential — as a “hook” for better outcomes for its population.

PCC’s new strategy rapidly and intensively prepares dropouts for entry into college-level work, and then immerses them in the college’s adult environment while they simultaneously complete a high school diploma and take college credit-bearing courses. Through Gateway to College, high school dropouts with at least an eighth-grade reading level (or a seventh-grade reading level and a willingness to take catch-up literacy courses) enroll in a first-term program in close-knit learning communities of 20 students. They are exposed to an intensive curriculum of

college preparatory courses designed to bring their writing, reading, math, study, and college and career-planning skills up to college level. With the close support of faculty and resource specialists, a carefully designed curriculum, and the draw of impending college coursework, these former dropouts can prepare quickly for the college experience.

After completing these courses in this first term, students move out of their small learning communities and into mainstream college classes that count toward both a high school diploma and an Associate’s degree. Their college coursework is in career “pathways” that are aligned with Oregon’s career learning frameworks and the college’s degree and certificate programs.

While students begin their program experience in their cohort on one campus, once they enroll in mainstream college courses they fan out across the city to any of four campuses that offer a range of courses in the state endorsed career pathways. To ensure their success in their selected college degree program, students continue to receive intensive, one-on-one, academic advising and support from their Gateway to College resource

specialist. Fully integrated into college life, they shed the former identity of “high school dropout.”

This balance of support and independence has proven to be effective with older adolescents who are employed and who seek both direction and independence: 83 percent of students entering in 2001-2002 achieved the reading level required to enroll in college-level courses, and 60 percent of students completed all college preparatory requirements and went on to enroll in a full college-credit bearing course of study. These former dropouts earned an average of 20 college credits in the first year.

Recognizing that the “pull” of college might be similarly successful with a less selective population of dropouts, PCC Prep offers two other campus-based programs to meet the needs of young people with very low basic skills or who need to earn a high school credential more quickly than Gateway to College allows. One option is the YES (Youth Empowered to Succeed) GED completion program. Depending upon their level of academic achievement, YES students who earn their GED can move directly into mainstream

college classes or enroll in Gateway to College as further preparation for college-level work. While these students continue to be grouped until they complete their GED, they also benefit from the college setting and the promise of entry into college-level courses upon completion of their certificate.

The other option is the Multicultural Academic Program, which is geared to the needs of non-native English speakers. MAP students receive intensive English language instruction and move at their own pace through three well-defined levels in order to achieve the level of English speaking, reading, and writing proficiency required to enter the Gateway to College high school completion program.

This system of multiple entry points to a college education rests on a carefully orchestrated front-end process. All students participate in a series of diagnostic assessments that allows program staff to identify which of the multiple entry points are appropriate for individual students, who enter with a wide range of literacy levels and life circumstances. In all three programs, while students are carefully coached and monitored throughout

their experience, the environment of the college campus sets a tone of seriousness and focus that is difficult to achieve in a traditional high school or GED program.

Portland Community College is replicating Gateway to College through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Early College High School initiative. Riverside Community College in Riverside, Calif., and Montgomery College in Rockville, Md., have received planning and start-up grants to take their successful alternative high schools to other parts of the country. PCC is currently seeking additional community colleges to replicate the program.

Excerpted from JFF paper entitled: *From the Prison Track to the College Track: Pathways to Postsecondary Success for Out of School Youth* (Pages 9-10)

Improving Options and Outcomes for Disconnected Youth through Community Organizing and Engagement: A Tale of Two Cities

The Youth Transitions Funders Group (YTFG) is a group of local, regional, and national philanthropies formed in 2002 with the goal of working in partnership on behalf of disconnected youth and young adults.¹³ In 2005, the struggling students/out-of-school youth (ss/osy) Workgroup of the YTFG launched a Strategic Assessment Initiative in five cities: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, and San Jose. **The goal of the initiative was to help cities in their efforts to move from piecemeal to systemic approaches to improving options and outcomes for struggling students and out-of-school youth and to gain national visibility for this important systemic work.** Community organizing and engagement was an important component of the Strategic Assessment Initiative. Sites received 12-month grants of \$275,000 each, \$50,000 of which was set aside for the community organizing compo-

¹³ Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

ment. The following snapshots illustrate how two cities approached the community organizing component of the initiative.

San Jose, CA

San Jose is a city with multiple overlapping school districts, each with its own “disciplinary” schools, serving approximately 42,000 youth. Estimates indicate approximately 1,000 students (9-12th grade) leave school each year.¹⁴ The United Way of Silicon Valley is the lead organization for a 39-member collaborative partnership participating in the Strategic Assessment Initiative.

One partner, the Greater San Jose Alternative Education Collaborative (AEC), has emerged as a vehicle for leadership and change on issues pertaining to ss/osy. The ACE has been successful in building stakeholder commitment by aligning the interests and missions of the diverse partnering agencies, organizations, and institutions into a coherent vision and shared agenda on behalf of ss/osy in the San Jose community. Drawing on a history of collaboration, making visible the need for high quality alternative education options and

making heard the voices of the parents and youth impacted by limited access to quality education options, the AEC leadership built a broad based collaborative committed to building a shared agenda for improving educational outcomes for disconnected youth.

A major accomplishment of the Strategic Assessment work in San Jose has been the use of community organizing to secure commitment from County and partnering school districts to increase availability and quality of alternative schools. The lead organization actively involved in the community engagement activities is People Acting in Community Together (PACT), an organization formed to mobilize parents, youth, and local policy-makers against the County action to curtail alternative education programming. PACT organized an “action” that educated parents, provided leadership training to ss/osy in collaboration with another organization, Catholic Charities, and brought these key constituents together with district leaders and members of the County Office of Education (COE), giving them a forum for asking questions and making demands for change.

Youth provided their input in defining the problem, making recommendations on the AEC agenda, and directly addressing policy-makers in their community. This “action” won a commitment from the COE and partnering school districts to increase the availability of high quality alternative education.¹⁵

Portland, OR

Portland Public Schools enroll approximately 53,000 students in grades K-12, with over 20,000 students in grades 9-12. Approximately one out of every 10 students drop out each year. Portland is renowned for its wide array of learning options for young people who have left traditional high schools, all of which are supported by innovative state policy that requires the district to offer flexible learning environments with significant autonomy and stable per-pupil funding. There are approximately fifteen alternative schools and programs in the city, serving about 3,500 young people. These schools and programs faced threats to their stability due to inadequate performance data, ongoing budgetary crises, and limited data on size and scope of the cities drop out problem. The Portland

¹⁴ Jobs for the Future. Site Profiles: A Continuum of Strategies for Moving a Systemic Agenda

¹⁵ Jobs for the Future. Site Profiles: A Continuum of Strategies for Moving a Systemic Agenda

Steering Committee used the Strategic Assessment Initiative as an opportunity to align efforts on behalf of struggling students and out-of-school youth with an aggressive high school reform strategy.

Building Support at Leadership and Operational Levels for Reforms: Portland built on a deeply engrained culture of collaboration and democratic process and the momentum created by new district leadership to mobilize a broad range of cross-sector partners in leadership roles across the city. Portland organized the governance of the partnership at two levels — both “operations” and leadership. The two groups played different but critical roles. The Steering Committee consisted of key “operators” from each of the systems and organizations intimately involved in the lives of youth. These included the director of Educational Options and managers from other public systems, including housing, justice, human services, and workforce development who shepherded the initiative during this first year. Because these leaders had decision-making authority, the partnership served as a catalyst for innovative partnerships committed to enhancing options for struggling students and out-of-

school youth. This was further enhanced by the “out-of-box” thinking of the partnership chair — the director of housing and economic development — that has a long-history of fostering creative cross-sector collaborations.

At the same time, the partnership organized a high-level leadership group that played two key roles: 1) they committed to making decisions about realigning resources in response to the work of the partnership and 2) they served as a sounding board as the partnership developed a communications strategy for disconnected youth. The former group guided the day-to-day operations of the partnership and convened critical subcommittees, such as the Technical Advisory Team, while the Leadership Group worked to gain agreement on a shared vision with a focus on the acquisition of credentials by age 25 as a key indicator of success. The Leadership Group has committed to realign resources in support of this goal, which will be critical for the sustainability of the initiative in the absence of a strong base of private foundations in the city. In particular, the Leadership Group will target resources on key transition areas that result in young people falling off track in their quest for credentials.

Developing a youth organizing strategy. In Portland, a general lack of capacity for youth organizing created challenges to bringing youth voice and action to the efforts of the partnership. The lack of capacity is further complicated by long-standing barriers between what is often viewed as the “white establishment” and activist groups seated in the minority communities. The partnership worked to break down these barriers by reaching out to the leaders in the minority communities. The partnership also leveraged these relationships to produce a documentary of the experiences of dropouts, *Disconnected*, which they are using to mobilize agency support for developing collaborative rather than fragmented approach to youth services. In addition, the partnership has engaged an outside consultant to help them continue to bridge any divides among groups and develop a cohesive and sustainable youth organizing strategy for the city.

Source: Jobs for the Future. Site Profiles: A Continuum of Strategies for Moving a Systemic Agenda

Attachment 2

Organizations that substantively completed MDC survey of Triangle-area programs for Disconnected Youth:

Achievement Academy of Durham	Genesis Home
Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Coalition of NC	Haven House Services
Boomerang	High Five Regional Partnership
City of Durham OEWD WIA Youth Program	Museum of Life and Science
Communities in Schools of Durham	NC Cooperative Extension Service, Durham County - (2)
Communities in Schools of Wake County	Partners for Youth
Concern of Durham, Inc.	Positive Attitude for Life
Criminal Justice Resource Center	SeeSaw Studio - (2)
Durham AreaCorp	Tarheel Challenge Academy
Durham County DSS	Urban Ministries of Durham
Durham County DSS Volunteer Program	Volunteers for Youth, Inc.
Durham Together for Resilient Youth	Women in Action
Durham YMCAs	YO: Durham
El Centro Hispano	Youth Advocacy and Involvement Office, Department of Administration
El Pueblo, Inc.	
Futures for Kids (F4K)	

Questionnaire for Organizations Working With Disconnected/At-Risk Youth

Working Definitions

“Disconnected Youth” — Young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school or enrolled in further education or not working.

“At Risk Youth” — Young people in danger of becoming disconnected youth.

Contact Information

Name of Organization

Name of Contact Person and Title

Contact Information (Phone/Email)

Physical Address

Mailing Address

Organization Background

1. What is the mission/purpose of your organization?
2. What geographic area do you serve?
3. What specific youth population does your organization serve? Please include:
 - who is and is not eligible for service, and
 - why your organization chooses to focus on this population
4. What is your organization’s strategy to achieve its goals?
 - What are you trying to accomplish?

Disconnected Youth

5. What is your operating definition of “disconnected” or “at risk” youth?
6. What is your analysis of why the youth you serve are at risk or disconnected? OR What barriers do young people face in staying on the path to education, employment, and success in life?

Program Focus

7. What program(s) does your organization offer that work with disconnected/at risk youth?

8. How many youth participate in your program(s)? Do you have a waiting list for services?
9. How are youth selected to participate?
10. What are the goals of the program(s)?
 - What are the key activities of the program(s)?
 - What data or indicators do you examine to determine whether your program(s) meet their goals?
 - Would you be willing to share your data with us?
 - Do you perform an external evaluation of your program(s)?

Financing and Budget

11. What is the annual budget for your program(s)?
12. Is there a fee for your services?
13. What is/are your source(s) of financial support for your program(s)?
14. Have you experienced a significant increase or decrease in your financial support over the last two years?

Organizational Partners

15. With what other organizations or programs do you most often collaborate?
16. What other organizations in the Wake County/Durham County/Orange County area are doing valuable or significant work with disconnected or at risk youth?
17. What government policies/practices are/would be most helpful to your organization and program(s)?

Other

18. Identify some of the greatest challenges to or constraints on your work.
19. What else would you like us to know?

Summary of Survey of Triangle Organizations Working With Disconnected Youth

As part of MDC's work to examine the state of disconnected youth in the Triangle, in early 2007 MDC conducted a survey of organizations based in the Triangle currently working with disconnected or at risk youth. We contacted more than 110 organizations, of which number 53 completed our survey. MDC structured the survey to glean detailed information about the backgrounds, missions, and organizational structures of organizations working with disconnected youth, as well as to learn more about the challenges faced by these organizations and the everyday factors which affect their work. The following are MDC's condensed findings from this survey.

Key Themes:

- **Organizations:** There is a large, diverse group of organizations located in the Triangle working with disconnected youth from multiple angles. These organizations run the gamut from departments of county government to private nonprofit organizations to statewide advocacy coalitions.

Organizations were fairly evenly divided between those that seek to prevent youth from falling into disconnection, and those that deal with the symptoms of disconnection. Several of the programs are excellent, and based upon effective and nationally researched strategies. The great majority of organizations responding collect no fee for their services, and nearly all expressed that the needs of the population served exceed the capacity of program staff. Those providing direct services to disconnected or at-risk youth organizations described lengthy waiting lists for their services.

- **Disconnection:** Most organizations' operating definitions of "disconnected" and "at-risk" youth match those offered by MDC in the questionnaire, although a number of organizations were unfamiliar with the term "disconnected." Organizations identified a wide selection of factors leading to disconnection for Triangle youth. Among the factors identified, the most prominent, and frequently mentioned were family-related problems, a general lack of hope or prospects among youth, poor economic situation, lack of community support, and exposure to gangs and illegal activities. As

one program administrator succinctly expressed, "The young people we serve are at risk because their lives are in constant danger—parents in danger of losing low-paying jobs often without health insurance benefits; danger of eviction from public housing; danger from gang and other criminal activity in their neighborhoods; danger of being left behind because parents do not have the tools they need to help with school work; danger of not being able to complete an assignment because there is no computer in the home or mom works evenings and can't buy supplies needed for the next day; danger of being 'invisible' or worse, stereotyped; danger from teachers and administrators who do not understand the nuances of poverty and subsequent behaviors."

- **Challenges to Work:** Regardless of their organization type, mission, or source of funding, organizations identified a lack of adequate funding as either the primary obstacle or a significant secondary obstacle to their work with disconnected youth. A large number of organizations spoke candidly about the difficulty of working with the disconnected youth population, the great need for broad-based, multi-level

support for participants in their programs, and stronger, more functional public structures to support their work.

Details:

Organizations working with disconnected youth in the Triangle have a wide range of foci and motivations, and target a number of more specific concerns in their work. The broad categories of work that organizations engage in are:

- Education
 - Dropout prevention
 - GED
- Employment
 - Work Training
 - Job skills
- Health & Direct Service
 - Teen pregnancy
 - Shelters
 - Emotional and behavioral care and counseling
- Crime Prevention
- Empowerment and advocacy

Organizations responding are heavily based in Durham County, and more than a fifth of our respondents operate multi-county programs or initiatives. Programs diverge into

two main groups with regard to ages of youth served:

1. Those programs serving children up to age 16 and working primarily on preventative measures—dropout prevention, positive reinforcement, experiential learning, youth leadership.
2. Those programs serving youth ages roughly 16-early 20s, and catering to high school dropouts, juvenile delinquents, and others who are already “disconnected” or showing signs of having serious problems.

Youth served by programs in our survey overwhelmingly participate in programs voluntarily. In fact, only three organizations reported that youth came to their programs through court orders or referrals. Only a handful of organizations reported that they possessed the capacity to actively recruit disconnected or at-risk youth for their programs; the great majority reported utilizing “first-come, first-served” policies.

Financially, only six organizations reported annual budgets larger than \$500,000, and funding sources were evenly divided among government funding, private grants, and donations or other fundraising efforts. While

half of those responding expressed no significant change in their funding over the past two years, a fourth described a significant increase in funding from all sources, and the final fourth described a significant decrease.

In response to our question about government policies or practices that would be most helpful to their organization’s work, respondents were generally adamant that government on all levels needed to do more to fund and guide organizations working with disconnected youth. Many organizations were also clear in their desire that funding from government be tied to the need to let outcomes guide funding, rather than budget needs. One candid response was, “We think programs should be funded for outcomes that benefit their students/clients. We think that funding for education should be based on the number of students that graduate. We have not experienced outcomes based funding. We see many agencies working with ‘at risk’ youth who receive major funding for job skills which mean nothing if a student does not have a secondary diploma. Without a post-secondary certification or diploma most people will not find a reliable job above poverty wages or with benefits. Also there

are many programs being funded to keep kids in school. Public information should NOT be about a 'drop out' rate. Public information about the success of any program would be about the real 'four year graduation rate'. How many students who graduate from eighth are actually graduating from high school four years later? We need a change in language. All those students who do not graduate will be in poverty no matter what anyone says the 'drop out' rate is."

In addition, our question about changes in government policy elicited powerful responses, some of which are collected verbatim below.

"It appears as if the government policies and practices are hurting rather than helping organizations such as ours. As the State is trying to manage the system, they are excluding input from established providers and appearing to be letting funding concerns drive policy."

"Government programs, like nonprofits, need to do a much better job of using evidence-based programs."

"[We need] continued funding [and] a

change in the mandatory age in which a child should attend school, from 16 to 18 years."

In addition to the widespread need for increased funding, respondents identified many specific challenges to their work. Among these were transportation for youth to get to programs, the difficulty in finding adequate time to work with youth, and the need for employers willing to hire ex-offenders.

"We need increased funding. I find that new agencies and programs have problems getting new funds from local sources because programs that have been funded in the past continue to get funding regardless of their quality (there are a few exceptions to this). Local decision makers also have limited knowledge and belief in the use of research in guiding funding decisions."

"We are committed to making a positive difference in the lives of every student we can. We believe in each of these children and urge them to believe in themselves. Without major support to see these children as untapped potential and to provide resources necessary to help them reach their potential for their sake, their family's safe, and their commu-

nity's safe the "achievement gap" will never go away. If policy makers and leaders don't really commit to give these children every advantage, and understand where these children come from, change will continue to be an elusive dream."

"Ask folks in our community if they care about kids and you'll get a loud 'yes.' Ask what they're doing and you'll hear crickets chirp. There are very few programs out there and funding is tight. I'm glad that someone is trying to get a handle on the need."

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