

Connecting Hartford's Youth to Employment Opportunities

A Scan of Best Practice Examples



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

CREATING STRATEGIES
FOR EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

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Purpose

At the request of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, on behalf of Hartford, Connecticut's Workforce Development Board, Jobs for the Future presents this paper to assist the board in designing effective work-related opportunities for Hartford's youth, particularly those 18 to 24 years old. This scan of best practice examples highlights five models of effective programming that connect youth-at-risk efforts to economic development. The models come from: Boston, Massachusetts; Brockton, Massachusetts; Dayton, Ohio; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Portland, Oregon.

Jobs for the Future selected these models because they exemplify strong connections between public education systems and emerging economic development opportunities at the local and/or state level. Each community and practice represents an investment in young people, and each values the connection between work and learning and understands the influence of the emerging workforce in the attainment of an economic vision. These communities also share certain demographics with Hartford, appreciate challenges that affect work particular to urban settings, and can demonstrate that young people's lives have been improved by the practices described here.

Introduction

Jobs for the Future has defined a set of core features that exist in powerful learning environments. Derived from findings across research related to education, youth development, and workforce development, these features appear to foster successful transitions into adulthood, particularly for youth who are disengaged from traditional education systems. Adria Steinberg, Program Director at JFF, calls these core features the six "C's".

- ***Caring Relationships:*** The most fundamental feature of an effective learning environment is the presence of adults who demonstrate their caring for and genuine interest in the youth who participate. Research has shown that the nurturing and high expectations offered by even one caring adult can make a critical difference in whether a young person attends regularly or persists in the face of obstacles. More than any of the other features, this "C" has found its way into the high school reform conversation and is reflected in a growing commitment to "small schools" or "small learning communities," "advisories," and other forms of personalization.
- ***Culture of Peer Support for Effort:*** Many high-risk youth behaviors are blamed on peer pressure and youth culture. While it is true that young people are much more likely to engage in behaviors their friends and peers approve of and model, peer influence can tip the scale in either direction. Researchers have confirmed

the damage that can occur when student popularity is linked to lack of effort and school achievement is associated with “acting white” or being a “nerd.” At the same time, being part of a positive peer group can lead to higher academic achievement, increased school competence, and higher educational aspirations. Effective learning environments take advantage of positive peer influence and foster peer cultures that look and feel like sports teams or drama groups. In these environments, young people count on and applaud one another’s efforts and successes.

- *Competency-Centered, Concept-Rich Teaching and Learning:* Young people want to become capable and competent adults; in fact, a major reason they give for disconnection from school is that it’s just “busywork” that “won’t help me in my future.” Research on learning, especially on the transfer of learning, supports the notion that knowledge learned at the level of rote memory rarely transfers and that knowing must be combined with doing—with learning when and how to use the skills and knowledge. Effective learning environments focus explicitly on developing and applying competencies and habits of mind that are essential to skilled performance in college and careers. Concept-rich rather than content packed, such environments encourage students to understand what different modes of inquiry can contribute to solving a problem, how one problem is similar to and different from another, and how particular skills and concepts contribute to competent adult performance.
- *Challenging Projects and Performances:* Adolescence is a period of exploring interest, testing oneself, and trying out different roles and identities. Developmental studies emphasize that young people are much more likely to build the optimism and resilience crucial to satisfying adult lives if they are intensely involved in constructive projects that require skill and discipline. While schools measure performance on literally hundreds of tests, the quality of our adult lives depends on how well we execute projects. Unlike most tests, challenging projects provide opportunities to obtain ongoing feedback and to engage in self-assessment and reflection, activities necessary to internalizing concepts of high quality work. Effective learning environments call upon youth to carry out complex and engaging projects that provide opportunities to explore and expand their interests, plan ahead, evolve and revise the work, practice their competencies, and present their work to others.
- *Connections to Expanding Networks and Opportunities:* Many young people lack the access to enriched learning environments and well-connected adults that comes as a birthright to others. But all young people need help making transitions. To make a successful transition to the world beyond high school, young people need not only adult role models but also the concrete support and assistance of capable adults. According to researchers, young people’s ambitions will remain “dreamlike” unless they can turn to adults who help them make sensible decisions, obtain good information about college and career paths, and handle the challenges of applying for college and financial aid.
- *Community Membership, Voice, and Contributions:* To feel like they are part of a community, young people need to feel that their presence and their views count. Effective learning environments make young people feel like they are resources and potential leaders, rather than problems who need to be fixed. Evaluations of

programs in which youth teach younger children, are leaders, or participate in service learning all show positive effects on a range of learning outcomes.

Creating a community that provides opportunities for young people to be exposed to the "6 C's" requires thoughtful approaches and a commitment to broadening the definition of a learning environment beyond the school walls. The 6C's can frame practice, programs, and policy as the Workforce Development Task Force considers its recommendations for connecting Hartford's youth to education and the economy—particularly those young people who are hardest to reach and hardest to teach.

Understanding the assets that Hartford's youth bring today and having a vision of their potential contributions as integral to the social and economic viability of the community are important steps in the work that lies ahead. However, the work ahead is arduous. The Hartford community presents an environment fraught with complexities and challenges. Hartford's Latino and African-American populations together represent close to 80 percent of the city's population. These two groups include a large proportion of people who are economically disadvantaged, disconnected from the current workforce delivery system, and ill-prepared to take advantage of the next generation of job opportunities. In addition, 46 percent of Hartford's residents speak a language other than English; close to 40 percent of residents over 25 never received a high school diploma; and only 11 percent of the city's inhabitants have achieved a two-year or four-year postsecondary credential (Source: U.S. Census Bureau data for 2000). According to the *New York Times* (August 26, 2000), Hartford's schools have been "mismanaged into dysfunction."

These and other statistics and factors are daunting, yet there is room for optimism. Other communities have faced and overcome similar challenges. In these communities, many of the most vulnerable young people are experiencing success. Yet even so, there are no cookie-cutter solutions or silver bullets. Each community has to appraise its assets as well as its liabilities to implement strategies that work locally, and in many cases, the task has included forging new alliances and burying past pain.

What Can Hartford Learn from the Snapshots

Boston, Massachusetts

Boston has a long history of employer involvement in youth-related workforce and education initiatives. The well-known Boston Compact began as an accountability agreement between the public school system and its business and higher education partners in 1982 with the express purpose of engaging the community in the school improvement process. Over time, arts and cultural organizations, human service providers, and parent groups have joined the list of signatories of this highly visible document.

Since its inception, the Boston Private Industry Council has been the intermediary responsible for connecting Boston youth—in-school, out-of-school, and graduates—with jobs. The PIC has engaged employers from Boston's strongest industry sectors (health care and telecommunications, for example) to develop job opportunities with long-term promise for these young people.

Boston has developed strategies that move small programs on the periphery to large-scale intensive efforts at the local and state levels. With a focus on documenting progress and benchmarking the impact of work-based learning on student's and employers, Boston has effectively engaged the support of a wide range of stakeholders.

Brockton, Massachusetts

Brockton's Champion Charter School was created to respond to the city's need to reengage young people who had slipped through the cracks of the public school system. A charter school, Champion is designed to seek out 16 to 21-year-olds who have left high school before earning a diploma.

The curriculum is based on school-to-work tenets, with strong connections between work and learning. It provides integrated learning experiences that demonstrate for young people the relationship between classroom academics and workplace realities. The coursework, designed to address each student's personal growth and role in the community, helps young people plot a course toward the future.

Dayton, Ohio

Community colleges can be a powerful lever in the quest to develop a high-performance workforce system. Sinclair Community College in Dayton is leading a countywide initiative that envisions an integrated system of workforce delivery and human services that can address the needs of out-of-school youth. The city has engaged in this work since 1987, when the community rallied to create a Job Center as part of a Self-Sufficiency Program. The Job Center found that most of its clientele lacked a high school diploma and that nearly 70 percent of all the county's human spending was earmarked for human services and criminal justice programs designed for this population. As a result, the community took a stand to make a change for the better.

Like so many of the nation's inner cities, Dayton has a high number of low-income families, in this case, twice as many as the whole state of Ohio. Dayton is also struggling with a severe out-of-school youth issue and determining the best interventions for this population. Recognizing that economic opportunities for these youth are bleak to non-existent without significant intervention strategies, programming, and resources, Dayton has taken on this issue, and it is using the community college as an avenue out of poverty.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Philadelphia is an exemplar of the need for and influence of a strong intermediary organization. In the context of serving youth, intermediaries are "staffed organizations that connect schools and other youth-preparation organizations with workplaces and other community recourses so that young people can combine learning with doing and become better prepared for postsecondary learning and careers" (Source: *School-to-Work Intermediary Guidebook* 2001). As such, they perform a variety of functions, from brokering work-based learning opportunities between schools and workplaces, to convening stakeholders, to promoting effective policies and ensuring the quality and impact of youth-serving policies and programs.

In Philadelphia, over half of the city's residents are people of color. Like Hartford, of the population 25 years and over, approximately 20 percent have no high school diploma, and only 10 percent have a Bachelor's degree. To address the issues of education and workforce development, the Philadelphia Youth Network is taking a leadership role to align performance indicators for the Workforce Investment Act with the school district's standards. The organization, with membership that includes representatives from youth-servicing agencies, has the support of the mayor and the superintendent, as well as business and community leaders.

Portland, Oregon

In Portland, the community college is a major player in workforce development. Over 2,000 high school-age students enroll at Portland Community College, making it the largest high school in the city. It is the lead partner in the Youth Opportunity Center and alternative education network, as well as the primary service provider for welfare-to-work and dislocated worker services in a tri-county region. Committed to retention and advancement for youth and adults with low-literacy, PCC has developed innovative approaches to teaching and learning. The city has seen an influx of Eastern European and Southeast Asian immigrants and consequently a growing demand for ESL.

PCC has developed career programs in the information Technology industries that are replacing manufacturing and business as the source of many local jobs. Intel, the area's most prominent technology player, is actively engaged in designing relevant curricula that meet industry standards. Overall, high tech, biotech, semiconductors, and metals manufacturers are driving industry-specific training at the community college.

A key feature of PCC's approach for out-of-school youth (and other students) is its clear articulation of a "ladder of opportunity." This provides clear pathways into the college's career programs in the region's most important industries.

What the Snapshots Tell Us

Jobs for the Future offers the community snapshots for your consideration with a caveat: no strategy can be replicated exactly. These snapshots provide a look into effective practices that connect work and learning for young people most at risk. Examples of the 6'Cs can be found in each of the snapshots, yet no one snapshot has thoroughly implemented all of them.

As the task force contemplates recommendations that will explicitly connect Hartford's youth to economic opportunities in the region, tension will arise from the pull between what is possible and current realities. To be effective, replication efforts will need to value the spirit of Hartford, recognize work underway in the community, and imagine what is possible within the community's current and projected realities. This is no easy charge, yet Hartford's role in Connecticut's emerging workforce development efforts will depend largely upon the city's ability to connect its youth—many of whom are the most vulnerable—to effective workforce delivery systems.

High Leverage Strategies for Connecting Vulnerable Youth to Economic Opportunity

From our scan of the field, Jobs for the Future has derived the following high-leverage strategies for Hartford to consider as it seeks to connect vulnerable youth to economic opportunity. Many of these strategies overlap and relate to one another. Just as important, this is not a list of possible alternatives; rather, all these strategies are necessary components of a comprehensive system for serving a city's youth.

- Include the public education system as a visible and vocal partner.
- Develop and nurture a powerful community collaborative effort in which key stakeholders are accountable for the well-being of young people and use data to drive decisions and to track the community's progress toward goals.
- Identify and/or endorse one or more intermediary organizations capable of connecting young people to economic opportunity.
- To create economic opportunities for at-risk youth, select and focus on a small number of strong or emerging industries that offer entry-level jobs accessible to young people with relatively little experience and skills. The targeted industries should also have or provide connections to higher-level "rungs" on career ladders that people can climb to move toward family-supporting jobs.
- Take a "dual customer" approach that treats both at-risk youth and employers as customers who both must be satisfied. These customers (or their representatives or advocates) must be part of a stakeholder group or collaborative.
- Consider community colleges as a linchpin for connecting education and the economy. In the region's strong and emerging industries, community colleges can play a prominent role in the development of education and training pathways that move people from the academic basics to higher-level technical skills.
- Nurture a community-based network capable of reaching out to and supporting young people throughout the process of acquiring skills and good jobs.
- Develop programming with youth development principles and practices at the heart.
- Recognize that the implications of policy can be profound, whether at the local, state, or national level. Promote existing policies and recommend new ones that support successful transitions for youth.

Conclusion

Jobs for the Future has highlighted good work taking place across the country. This study is designed to spark ideas and raise questions for the Hartford community to consider in developing programs that effectively connect youth to workforce delivery systems.

In many respects, Hartford's emerging workforce—young people now in school, as well as those who have slipped through the cracks—will determine the city's contribution to the state's economic engine. Investing the time, energy, and resources required to formally articulate education and workforce systems will only strengthen the community's economic outlook.

Jobs for the Future recommends the following next steps for your consideration.

- Leverage this document to jumpstart conversations and actions in Hartford.
- Conduct a "mapping" that yields inventories of the community's key initiatives, constituencies, programs, and intermediaries that could provide funding, support, or operational capacity for future efforts.
- Conduct a qualitative assessment of local youth-serving organizations.

Finally, we recommend the Hartford representatives participate in peer learning opportunities designed to provide a closer look at one or more exemplary practices. This would entail site visits that deepen the board's understanding of particular models and advance thinking on implementation issues for the Hartford community to consider.