

Helping At-Risk Youth Stay in School

Background

In 2002 and 2003, The Nicholson Foundation began meeting with community representatives in Newark, New Jersey, to determine how the Foundation could facilitate improvements in the lives of the City's children and families. These stakeholders suggested that increasing the number of Newark students who graduate from high school would help accomplish this goal. They believed that the City's low graduation rate was a root cause of several socioeconomic challenges faced by Newark's children and families. They thought that the large number of dropouts was a cause of Newark's elevated crime rate. In fact, research on the impact of dropout rates indicated that youth who do not graduate from high school—compared with those who do—are more likely to be disengaged from their communities, live in poverty, become homeless, serve time in prison, depend on government programs, and have more health problems.¹ Moreover, the children of these school dropouts are at considerable risk of following in their parents' footsteps. Elevated high school dropout rates also have adverse economic consequences for communities. For example, communities with a poorly educated workforce are less likely to attract businesses, leading to a smaller tax base, higher public-benefit costs, and increased crime.

The community's input, along with research findings, prompted the Foundation to begin working with Newark's stakeholders to help more of the City's young people stay in or return to school, so that they could complete high school, obtain good jobs, or continue their education. To achieve these goals, The Nicholson Foundation began to convene expanded groups of stakeholders—including school district staff, post-secondary educational institutions, community and faith-based organizations, former dropouts, parents, business leaders, philanthropic organizations, and government officials—to find solutions to the problem of Newark's disconnected youth. These stakeholders understood that Newark's school district alone could not effectively increase the number of youth who complete high school and acknowledged the importance of their role in combating the problem.

An important step in addressing the needs of Newark’s disconnected youth was to determine the dimension of the problem. However, because of the growing recognition that the official data available at the time greatly underreported the true high school dropout rate in Newark, the Foundation and its community partners looked at other indicators to better understand the extent to which Newark’s youth were disconnecting from school. Among the 42,241 students enrolled in Newark Public Schools during 2001-2002, of whom 10,209 were high school students, there were 2,167 suspensions and 385 violent incidents during the school year. For Newark at large, there were 1,923 arrests among school-age youth—18% for violent crimes—and 648 births to young women aged 15 to 19, representing 6% of the age group. The majority of Newark’s ninth graders had not passed New Jersey’s eighth-grade proficiency tests in either language arts or math, with failure rates of 55% and 76% respectively.^{2 3} Nevertheless, these students had been promoted, without sufficient skills to succeed.

In 2008, reliable data on graduation rates became available from the Newark Public Schools’ Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Testing. Forty-eight percent of those starting ninth grade in Newark do not complete the 12th grade. This is consistent with findings for the nation’s 50 largest cities.⁴

Underlying Strengths to Build On

Despite these formidable challenges, The Nicholson Foundation and community leaders recognized that Newark had important assets. Stakeholders in the Newark community were committed to solving the problem of disconnected youth, and they acknowledged that they had to work in concert with the school district in order to maximize their chance of success. Newark Public Schools had a history of operating strong alternative programs that implemented innovative and nontraditional approaches to serve students at risk of failure. The staff of the Office of Alternative Education—the branch of the District’s administration that had been integrally involved in these alternative programs—had a cadre of experienced leaders who could help bolster school completion. The Office was already collaborating with Rutgers University and the Juvenile Justice Commission to support the most disconnected youth. A further asset was Newark’s Essex County College, which welcomed and was already serving large numbers of Newark’s dropouts who were interested in continuing their education but did not want to return to high school.

Yet another strength was the way in which Newark's schools were financed. As a result of a series of New Jersey Supreme Court decisions, the Newark School District received significant State aid, allowing its schools to spend as much per pupil as New Jersey's wealthiest districts.⁵ According to the most recent information then available, the District had the smallest pupil/teacher ratio (12.1 to 1) and the highest per pupil expenditures (\$17,652) of the 100 largest school districts in the nation.⁶ The State funding formula, moreover, was based on the number of students attending the prior year. This meant that successful initiatives to reengage students could become self-financing after 12 months.

Taking into account these positive factors, the Foundation was optimistic that, working with its community partners, it could help increase significantly the number of Newark's youth who stay engaged or return to school and become productive adults after graduating. The Foundation did not seek to promote large-scale school reform; rather, its goal was to increase school engagement and graduation rates. The Foundation began to provide technical assistance and [grants](#) to develop, implement, and evaluate initiatives to meet these objectives. For example, Nicholson started to support programs that recruited more three- and four-year-olds into Newark's excellent pre-school education programs. The Foundation also began financing outreach, mentoring, and job-preparation programs for disconnected youth, as well as initiatives that identify and connect pregnant and parenting teens with pre- and postnatal services, while helping them stay in school. It commenced funding the development and implementation of a range of alternative education programs that provide at-risk youth with multiple pathways to completing high school. As of the end of 2008, The Nicholson Foundation had committed \$3.7 million to these projects. In addition, the Foundation has worked with its partners to identify and leverage other funding streams.

Factors Associated with the Dropout Process

Research conducted in the past decade has shown that the process of dropping out of school is complex and driven by a number of factors. Rather than a single event, dropping out is the end result of a long process of disengagement and alienation. Disengagement often begins in the early grades. It is exacerbated by the synergistic triad of family poverty, a poorly educated parent, and growing up in a single-parent household. Students who have low grades, are frequently absent, have had disciplinary problems, have been left back, and/or have changed schools several

times are especially vulnerable to dropping out. All of these factors, alone or in combination, make it more likely that students will leave school prematurely.

The Nicholson Foundation has integrated this empirically-based understanding of this process into the dropout-prevention and youth re-enrollment programs that it supports. Moreover, Nicholson is committed to incorporating into the programs it funds the latest research findings about what works best and to aiding its partners in incorporating evidenced-based findings into Newark's school-based projects. Nicholson has therefore supported several evaluations of Foundation-funded education initiatives in order to improve their service delivery and outcomes. Many of the principles of effective dropout-prevention programming, based on the most recent research, are described in the [Appendix](#). They include creating small learning communities, providing an array of services for the student and the family, making the curricula relevant to each student's interests and needs, and fostering positive school environments.

Newark's Approach to Dropout-Prevention Programming

Central to Newark's strategy for increasing the high school completion rate is the Youth Education and Employment Success (YE²S) Center. The Center, opened in early 2008, is a collaboration among the City of Newark, Newark Public Schools, Essex County, the New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission, Communities In Schools of New Jersey, Rutgers University, The Nicholson Foundation, and numerous community-based organizations. It was conceived as a one-stop resource for serving Newark's at-risk youth.

The YE²S Center conducts outreach to Newark public school students at high risk of dropping out, those who have already dropped out, and those returning from the juvenile justice system. Each young person who agrees to work with the Center receives a comprehensive educational, social, and health assessment by a school social worker or guidance counselor who works with the youth and the family. The assessment leads to an individualized plan designed to increase the likelihood that the youth will remain in or return to school. If interested, the young person is referred to one of Newark's small-school programs that best matches his or her learning style, interests, and current life circumstances.

Many of these schools implement one or several of the best-practice methodologies described in the [Appendix](#). For example, the school may offer work-study options; hold classes at Essex County College for which both a high school diploma and an associate degree can be granted; allow the student to take classes via the Internet at a time, place, and pace of his or her choosing; or organize its instruction around a theme. A YE²S participant who requires health or social services is referred to the appropriate organizations that offer services such as government benefits, counseling, and prenatal care. A student who requires extra support or could benefit from an adult role model is assigned a case manager or mentor who meets the student regularly to help him or her stay connected to the educational experience and overcome barriers to participation. The YE²S Center monitors the student's participation and progress and receives feedback from the student, the family, the case manager, the mentor, teachers, and community-service providers.

Many of the services are provided by the YE²S Center partners, who have primary or satellite offices in the Center and operate the following programs:

- The Newark Public Schools' Office of Alternative Education provides multiple educational options and develops individual plans for the students that include wrap-around services.
- Rutgers' T.E.E.M. (Transitional Education and Employment Management) Gateway program serves youth returning to Essex County from State Juvenile Justice facilities and the County Detention Center. It provides case management, computer training, family services, educational/employment placement assistance, and ensures the youth reach and receive the services.
- Essex County Vicinage Juvenile Probation, a division of the State Courts, meets at the YE²S Center with youth under its supervision to ensure they comply with their probation plans and to connect this population to a wider array of services.

- Communities In Schools (CIS) of New Jersey, a chapter of the national organization dedicated to helping children succeed by connecting schools to community resources, is working closely with evaluators from the Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University to develop a comprehensive data management system for the Center. In partnership with Newark Public Schools, CIS operates the Mentoring Success Center and the Newark Workforce Development Institute ([NWDI](#)) Performance Learning Center.
- The City of Newark's Operation FOCUS works with the Essex County Juvenile Detention Center to provide support for incarcerated youth and make sure they connect to social services, both while they are detained and upon their release as they and their families navigate the judicial system.
- Newark Public Schools' Young Women's Health Forum identifies pregnant students, connects them to prenatal services, and provides information and support to promote healthy pregnancies and school engagement.
- The One-Stop Youth Career Center of the Newark Workforce Investment Board has located staff at the YE²S Center. The One-Stop develops and funds work internships, coordinates training, places youth in jobs, helps them succeed, and provides on-going case management.
- The Salvation Army operates a day-care center for infants and young children in the YE²S Center. The Salvation Army is also implementing a pair of Boys and Girls Clubs—one in the Juvenile Detention Center and one in the YE²S Center—that are linked by shared staff, facilitating a transition between the two sites. The Clubs' DITTO (Delinquency Intervention Through Targeted Outreach) program, available to all youth on probation, helps the youth successfully reintegrate into the community.

The Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University is conducting both process and outcome evaluations.

Signs of Success

Much has been accomplished since The Nicholson Foundation began collaborating with its community partners. In addition to the YE²S Center, a number of alternative school options have been implemented. NWDI was established to reengage dropouts who could benefit from a strong employment focus. Each student has a paid internship coupled with self-paced, on-line instruction. NWDI opened in the fall of 2007 with 50 dropouts; 25 of them were awarded diplomas in June 2008. All but one graduate, who secured a high paying job, had college aspirations.

The Virtual High School commenced enrolling students in the fall of 2008. It allows students to use distance learning to complete courses that satisfy all or part of their high school course requirements. This program is particularly appropriate for youth who have medical or mental health problems or have dropped out due to incarceration, employment, or childcare responsibilities. The Virtual High is managed by staff located at the YE²S Center.

The Foundation also helped the Newark Public School District and Essex County College (ECC) implement the Gateway to College program, which has formalized the College's role in serving Newark's disconnected youth. Former dropouts earn a high school diploma by studying college coursework that completes their high school requirements and also applies to their college degree. Students who need help in reaching the college level can take remedial courses before attempting classes that qualify for college credit. The Walton Foundation has provided a grant for the start up of this alternative school, which is one of the models of the National League of Cities' Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI), funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The important role that alternative education can play in engaging and reengaging at-risk and disconnected youth has been recognized by the District. In 2008, the Director of the Office of Alternative Education, whose office is at the YE²S Center, was appointed to the Superintendent's Executive Committee. In the same year, the District assigned truancy and attendance staff specifically to work with the Center.

The Foundation is testing whether community groups at the grass-roots level can become involved in improving school engagement. A Drop Out and Truancy Prevention initiative provides a monetary incentive for helping dropouts reenroll or chronic truants maintain satisfactory attendance. In the first year of the program, 69 youth became reengaged.

The Commitment of Government Leaders and National Organizations

Since the partnership to address dropouts in Newark coalesced, the importance of the issue has received growing recognition among policy makers at all levels of government. Many urban areas throughout New Jersey and the nation have begun to implement programs to help their students stay in school and remain engaged in learning until they graduate. Furthermore, the widespread acknowledgment of the dropout crisis in America's cities has prompted elected officials—the Mayor of Newark, the Governor of the State of New Jersey, and the President—to speak out on the issue and make public commitments to address the problem.

The City of Newark

Mayor Cory Booker has recognized that Newark's unacceptably high dropout rate negatively affects the quality of life in the City and its prospects for revitalization. The Mayor believes strongly that Newark's young people have great potential, however, and can be one of the City's best assets.

In his 2008 State of the City address, Mayor Booker stated:

My Administration will continue to labor in support of improved educational outcomes for our children. Through in-school mentoring programs, increased school-to-work efforts, our new Brick City College Scholarship fund, the Mayor's Academic Challenge, which provides thousands of high school students with performance incentives (some of whose highest performers are here tonight), and the recent launch of the YE²S Center (the Youth Education and Employment Success Center)—the first of its kind in New Jersey for at-risk and disaffected youth—my Administration is stepping up to support our children.⁷

In early 2008, the City joined the educational community represented by Newark Public Schools and Essex County College, the business community represented by the Newark Alliance, and The Nicholson Foundation in responding to a Request for Proposals from the National League of Cities on behalf of its Alternative High School Initiative. Because of the commitment and efforts of the City itself and Newark's other stakeholders, and in recognition of the considerable progress that had already been made in implementing innovative and comprehensive programs for disconnected youth, Newark became one of only three cities to have been awarded the highly competitive "Place-based Partnership."

Through this grant, AHSI and its network of experts are providing technical assistance to enhance Newark's efforts to create or redesign high schools patterned after evidence-based, high-quality models that help disconnected youth prepare for college and career success. As part of this initiative, Newark is developing three Big Picture schools, which utilize internships based on each student's interests as the main context for learning; a Diploma Plus school, which is project-based and designed for over-age, under-credited youth; and an additional Performance Learning Center providing self-paced computerized instruction. The Schumann Fund, the Victoria Foundation, and the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation are sponsoring the Big Picture schools. These AHSI-assisted schools are scheduled to open in 2009. Others, such as a YouthBuild USA school, where students earn degrees while building affordable housing, are on the horizon.

Newark's relationship with AHSI is enabling the City, with its strong coalition of community partners, to become what AHSI calls "a learning laboratory closely observed by the education field," and has begun to allow other cities with high dropout rates to learn from Newark's experience. The AHSI grant, along with the support and nationwide recognition that accompanies it, is emblematic of the hard work and achievements of all those who have strived to increase the number of Newark's youth who complete high school.

The State of New Jersey

During 2008, the State and the city of Newark partnered a successful application to America's Promise Alliance to bring its renowned dropout-prevention advocacy campaign to New Jersey. In October 2008, at a conference in Newark attended by 450 education and community leaders, New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine and Alma Powell, Chair of America's Promise Alliance, launched the New Jersey High School Graduation Campaign, a yearlong effort to lower the State's high school dropout rate.

The Governor said:

Working together to ensure that more young people are graduating from high school and succeeding is critical for New Jersey...When we help increase the number of people who graduate from high school and who are career-ready, it naturally leads to stronger families, safer streets, and more vibrant communities. The aim is to ensure that kids are headed in the right direction and not falling into the trap of a life of crime. Staying in school is one of our best crime-prevention tools, and it requires the collaborative efforts of all of us to make it happen.⁸

In line with its commitment, the State is working with The Nicholson Foundation and the city of Camden, which has been under State administration since 2001, to replicate the YE²S Center. In addition, the Director of the YE²S Center was appointed to the Governor's Strategy for Safe Streets and Neighborhoods Coordinating Council to implement the model in other municipalities with large numbers of disconnected youth. The State's efforts on behalf of these youth are coordinated by the Attorney General's Office because of the Governor's conviction that helping youth stay in school or get jobs is key to reducing crime.

The National Scene

The problem of disconnected youth is a national one. MDRC, a social policy research corporation, reported in its November 2008 "Transition Series" for the Obama Administration that nearly one in seven 18- and 19-year-olds is disconnected: has not graduated from high school, is not attending school, and is not working. The figure is almost one in four for African Americans. MDRC noted that the overall record for programs for these youth has been largely discouraging.

They pointed, however, to a new generation of youth programs—specifically mentioning Gateway to College and YouthBuild—and noted early positive results. The new schools being developed in Newark are modeled on these encouraging prototypes.

President Obama has made education one of his three domestic policy priorities, specifically targeting the dropout problem. In his February 24, 2009 address to the nation, he brought the concept of shared responsibility as far as it can go—not only to government, school districts, and communities, but also to parents and even the children themselves.

The President said directly to disaffected youth:

And dropping out of school is no longer an option. It's not just quitting on yourself, it's quitting on your country—and this country needs and values the talents of every American.

Appendix

Key Elements of Successful Dropout-Prevention Programming

*Small Learning Communities*⁹

Attending school in a small learning community is strongly correlated with school completion and has a strong positive effect on student achievement. A small learning community is any separately defined, individualized learning unit within a school setting. Small schools are places where administrators are close to the faculty and regularly observe them in the classroom. The teachers know all of the students and become acquainted with their families. Small schools increase students' sense of belonging, which leads to safer and more orderly educational environments.

*Full-Service Community Schools*¹⁰

Schools do not generally have the resources or the expertise to adequately help students who are unable to benefit from academic instruction due to medical, social, or economic problems. To minimize these obstacles to students' learning and enable them to graduate, full-service community schools form strong partnerships with community agencies to address the barriers that impede the academic progress of each student. The community agencies that collaborate with full-service community schools often assign staff to work in the schools.

The services that community organizations offer vary from school to school: they are chosen by students, families, and other stakeholders, according to what will best serve the students.¹¹ Examples include school/community partnerships that

- enable schools to remain open for extended hours and additional days, which allows them to help students with their homework, provide them with a safe place to congregate, and operate after-school programs in educationally enriching environments;
- provide assessment and case-management services, primary-care health services, mental-health and substance-abuse counseling, referrals for pre-natal care, and on-site childcare;

- offer parent education, adult education, and opportunities for parental involvement in the students' education;
- coordinate mentoring to provide extra support for students and foster positive adult-child relationships; and
- organize expanded opportunities for students' learning through tutoring programs, college preparation, work-readiness training, work-study programs, internships, and job referrals.

Demanding Excellence and Opportunities for Skill Building^{12 13}

At-risk youth benefit from schools and teachers that set high expectations for students and communicate that each student can be successful. The schools' curricula must stress literacy and mathematical competence in order that all students be adequately prepared for the workplace or post-secondary education. However, the curricula must be relevant to individual students and capable of engaging them in learning that helps build confidence and a positive self-image. Because each student is unique in how he or she learns, a variety of engaging learning approaches and environments should be offered to increase the chances for success. Examples include the following:

- **Secondary/Post-Secondary Opportunities.** In collaboration with high schools, community colleges offer on-site courses that lead to both a high school diploma and an associate degree. The potential for a college credential, reinforced by actually attending a community college and identifying with its students and culture, often motivates the student to continue his or her education.
- **Extended Learning Opportunities.** Programs outside of the school that appeal to youths' interests or relate to their particular circumstances can help them stay engaged. These include extracurricular activities, virtual or distance learning, travel opportunities, and summer-learning activities. This diversity of learning environments and experiences can broaden the students' interests and expose them to learning that is not readily available in their communities. If the programs are supported by the school system, with academic credits awarded, students are more likely to stay connected to their school while assuming greater responsibility for their own learning. For example, a student who is interested in music may be given

school credit for organizing a band, performing during the summer or on weekends, or coordinating other aspects of the experience such as marketing and finances.

- **Educational/Employment Opportunities.** Programs that combine learning, vocational education, technical skills, and work experience for high school credit may have greater relevance for some students than a more traditional academic approach. For example, a student may use mathematical concepts while working part time for an air-conditioning and refrigeration company, receiving credit toward a high school diploma. This experience may help the student understand the applicability of math skills to longer-term job prospects, while also helping him or her remain connected to school and motivated by its goals.

Positive Organizational Environments

To foster meaningful school and work engagement, and to bolster the graduation rate among at-risk youth, schools must have strong and positive organizational environments. It is difficult for schools to create and sustain such environments if they do not have sufficient space for their students and staff, enough equipment and supplies, up-to-date technology, and access to a range of academic programs to meet the needs of a diverse spectrum of students. Schools must also be safe from threats of violence and use proven techniques to resolve conflicts.

In addition, positive organizational environments require strong leaders, particularly school principals. As the leaders of school communities, principals or directors play an important role in creating a positive culture that reinforces respect for all students, recognizes their individuality, and communicates that with the right help and resources, all students can reach their potential. School administrations should welcome families, community agencies, and other stakeholders to collaborate with them in order to improve scholastic performance and outcomes.

Principals and school administrations should recognize that teachers and other school staff need to feel supported. They require vehicles through which they can continue to develop their skills, find out about innovative new strategies, and learn to deal with difficult students and situations. Teachers must be regularly involved in formal and informal professional development activities that employ their skills to identify school improvements, develop curricula, provide professional improvement programs, and support other staff and partners.

Finally, in collaboration with all stakeholders, schools ought to collect and analyze data on various measurable short- and long-term outcomes, which they can then work to achieve, adjusting their policies as necessary.

Notes

- 1 National Governor's Association, *Graduation Counts. A Report of the National Governor's Association Task Force on State High School Graduation Data*, (Washington, D.C.: National Governor's Association, 2005), <http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0507grad.pdf>.
- 2 Association of Children of New Jersey, *Newark Kids Count 2004: A City Profile of Child Well-Being*, (Newark, New Jersey: Association of Children of New Jersey, 2004), <http://www.acnj.org>; also see Tanya Whitney-Williams, *Newark Kids Count 2000-2003: A City Profile of Child Well-Being*, (Newark, New Jersey: Association of Children of New Jersey, 2003); Association of Children of New Jersey, *Newark Kids Count 2005: A Snapshot of Child Well-Being*, (Newark, New Jersey: Association of Children of New Jersey, 2005).
- 3 The arrest and birth data apply to calendar year 2002. The test data excludes special education students.
- 4 MDRC, *Building Better Programs for Disconnected Youth*, (New York, NY: MDRC, 2008); one of a series of 15 framing memos on education and social issues prepared by MDRC for the incoming Obama Administration and the new Congress, http://www.mdrc.org/recommendation_5_print.html.
- 5 According to the State of New Jersey Department of Education, "Abbott" is a short-hand description of a series of New Jersey Supreme Court decisions growing out of litigation filed in 1981 on behalf of children residing in New Jersey's most economically disadvantaged municipalities. The Court ordered a comprehensive set of programs and reforms to close the achievement gap between urban and suburban students. The decision calls for "parity" in per-pupil funding for poor districts, equal to the State average. Each selected Abbott district, with funds provided by the State, must introduce Whole School Reform as well as supplemental services to compensate for disadvantage. High quality preschool for three and four year olds must be included. The State must support new and rehabilitated facilities to house all programs, relieve overcrowding, and eliminate building violations. Abbot-supported facilities must be healthy and safe and have reasonable class size—no more than 24 students for grades 6 to 12.
- 6 Ben Dalton, Jennifer Sable, Lee Hoffman, *Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 2003-2004*, U.S. Department of Education, (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2006, NCES 2006-329), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006329>; a statistical analysis report.
- 7 Mayor Cory Booker, *State of the City Address*, October 2008, http://www.ci.newark.nj.us/government/mayor_booker/2008_state_of_the_city_speech.php.

- 8 America's Promise Alliance, *The New Jersey High School Graduation Campaign: Keeping Kids in School*, an on-line press release dated October 15, 2008, <http://www.americaspromise.org/About-the-Alliance/Press-Room.aspx>.
- 9 Kathleen Cotton, *New Small Learning Communities: Findings from Recent Literature*, (Portland, Oregon: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001), <http://www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/APF03NewSmallLearningCommunities.pdf> .
- 10 Joy G. Dryfoos, *Community Schools in Action—Lessons from a Decade of Practice*, (Oxford University Press – USA, 2005).
- 11 Joy G. Dryfoos, “A Community School in Action,” *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 11.4 (2003): pp. 203-205, <http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-1105-dryfoos.html>.
- 12 Garance Frank-Ruta, “Aiming High: How New Research and Model Programs Are Reclaiming the American High School,” *The American Prospect*, 15.2 (2004).
- 13 Lili Allen, Cheryl Almeida, Adria Steinberg, *From the Prison Track to the College Track: Pathways to Postsecondary Success for Out-of-School Youth*, (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2004), <http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/prisontrack.pdf> .