

YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

Summary Report - May 2013



The King County Youth Advisory Council is a newly formed group of young people from Seattle and South King County who are advising and informing county-wide strategies, funding and practices.

We are visionaries and dreamers. We know what we want. We are diverse- all from different races, cultures, styles, backgrounds- and we are going through similar things. We are young, misunderstood, and judged by our appearances. We are resilient, overcoming adversity and want to succeed. We are strong, revolutionary, and we are fighting. We want change and we want to help. We are doing this for others. We want to be heard. We are breaking the cycle.

Beginning in January 2013, the Council was created to inform the United Way of King County's decision-making process around investing in older youth. The group is comprised of about 30 young people, aged 16-24 who have direct or close experiences with leaving school and/or being unemployed as a young adult.

This group is facilitated by adults and young adults from SOAR, New Futures, YouthForce at Boys & Girls Clubs of King County, Associated Recreation Council, Youth Tutoring Program, and YearUp. Two additional Focus Groups were facilitated by Nature Consortium and YouthForce.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

- Data regarding dropping out, employment and graduation was surprising to some and not for others (low percentage of young adults who earn a credential within 6 years and low youth employment rates)
- More efforts and resources seem to be put into pushing people out of school than to keeping them in school. There are not enough supports to keep people in high school, academically or emotionally.
- There are not enough programs to support youth (vocational, career readiness, school support, immigrant support) and programs that can support aren't widely known.
- Undocumented youth have far more barriers for success, even if they follow all the "rules".

PERSONAL NARRATIVES

- One youth dropped out of high school because of a need to help his parents, and because his mother told him to do so. The rest of his family had dropped out as well, as early as middle school. When he later graduated from high school, he became the first in his family and the 3rd from his home town.
- One young person dropped out when his sister went to jail. His family needed money, and he wanted to help his sister. At first, he was too embarrassed to go back to school and heard negative connotations of a GED.
- Another youth got "dropped" out of school because of poor attendance. He felt his teachers didn't care, and even let him sleep in class. He also had unaddressed challenges in math.
- Another wrote a personal letter to a teacher about life goals. The teacher read personal details aloud in class. He lost trust in his teachers, and eventually dropped out when his dad went to jail for immigration issues.
- One youth emphasized that many immigrants feel like they live in a different world and don't have the same opportunities as other teenagers. Most have been separated from family for long periods of time because of immigration or deportation. Some have been homeless and without food or shelter or money when parents were detained or deported. They don't have the same access to work or higher education and are treated like 2nd class citizens.
- One participant came to America as a refugee. His father is blind and mother was sick. Neither could work. He has 10 brothers and sisters and most of the time they don't have enough food to eat. He is 16 and wants to go to school but thinks it is more important to work to take care of family. He is tired of sleeping on the floor and not having any food to eat.

BARRIERS TO RECONNECTING WITH SCHOOL

Lack of Awareness

- Lack of awareness about programs
- Unsure of the logistics of finding a job, where to look, how to apply and interview
- Music and entertainment teaches us that you can get famous quick so some make bad decisions, not knowing the long term consequences
- No awareness (or existence) of alternatives to traditional schools

Lack of Support at School

- Some teachers or administrators don't seem to care about teaching or are tired of teaching
- In elementary, people and teachers are caring, but in middle and high school, they only pay attention when you are doing the wrong things
- No genuine support systems in school that help. More push out from school than work on retention.
- Feel like being forced to go to school
- Teachers who abuse their authority and are racist
- Nobody connects students to jobs

Lack of Trust

- Counselors don't follow thru with commitments
- Build hope about program services and later learn you don't qualify

Being Labeled/ Negative Perceptions

- Students are labeled and tracked as "good" or "bad," some groups have resources and others don't, even within same school
- Being represented by a grade instead of critical thinking and effort
- When students don't feel they are valued or welcome, they drop out
- Piercings and tattoos make teachers dismiss them
- In the media, people who are rich see us differently than how we see them- there are no characters that represent who we are on TV
- No leadership opportunities in or out of school
- Embarrassed to go back to school

Competing Priorities

- Want to go to school and learn work skills but can't because of making up for past failure
- Need to support family monetarily, summer job
- Need to support family time-wise
- No space or time to do homework
- Drugs – tempting. Hard time with authority figures.
- Pregnancy, lots of girls are pregnant in my school who are enrolled, but don't attend
- Money is needed to survive- sometimes you have to decide between school and work, especially if you are taking care of parents (physically and financially) or helping to pay rent. Work pays off immediately; school doesn't pay now and maybe not even later.
- ELL (English Language Learner) students are pushed off to the side, assumed they won't go far
- Learning disabilities

Lack of Relevancy or Engagement

- School is not relevant to our time, present and future work, it is outdated and boring
- School is not related to interests
- Textbooks don't tell the truth or the real story
- Graduation requirements are too high

Access

- Safety is an issue if programs are too far away and end late at night.
- Transportation and price of admission to other programs
- College is overwhelmingly expensive so even you do succeed in school, college still may not be possible

Program Barriers

- Not everyone gets accepted: some programs require grades even though the program is unrelated
- Lack of documentation, status, or Social Security Number
- Cost makes good programs inaccessible, even if there are scholarships, still seems out of reach
- Lack of affordable, dependable, accessible childcare if youth is a parent
- Limited program space
- Scholarships only for students with a high GPA

Missing Services

- Information about programs is outdated and too vague
- There is information on salaries for careers but not on how to actually get the job
- Challenging if you only have access to one translator and there is a poor relationship, only person to connect you to resources

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

- Employers are not willing to give you a chance if you have little or no experience
- Adults are given priority when employers are looking for experience
- School schedule (could start later to allow room for employment)
- Adults (employers) look down on youth. Youth are labeled lazy, unwilling to work, incapable, trouble, and discriminated against based on race or appearance
- Unaware of how to navigate hiring process or job interview and lack family or school support for it.
- The economy is bad, so there are fewer jobs for everyone
- Lack of (or no) documentation prevents youth from getting real jobs, accessing financial aid or even participating in programs
- Lack of a good education prevents you from getting a job
- Depends on your body size and image
- Lack of confidence

OTHER INSIGHTS

What leads to dropping out?

- Push-out: Schools making it clear that student weren't valued.
- Taking care to family, having to work to help support family.
- Going to work! Needing opportunities to help support family.

What do we need to help young people re-connect?

- Asking why students drop out in the first place and individualize the conversation
- Individualized work plans through community partnerships allowing students to access credit retrieval programs to get diplomas, not just GED
- Relevant class material, education based on personal interests

Why young people might not participate in afterschool programs:

- Afterschool activities might relate to school, which isn't a good thing. The idea of being forced to go to school. Better if programs are in communities/neighborhood rather than tied to school.
- Parents might not be aware and questions if it's worth the kids' and/or family time.

What would make young people participate in youth programs?

- Programs that help with job skills, resume writing, general help with where you want to go
- Understand personal interests and allow students to explore options for different fields/paths

SOLUTIONS

- So many people working to create opportunities and so many people struggling. There needs to be more to bridge these needs and opportunities
- More mentors
 - Share success stories and models
 - Mentors to help navigate future and set goals
 - Advisors and mentors to help understand how to navigate future (and meet goals)
- More support
 - More understanding people to support youth, who know where the youth are coming from, are there to talk whenever, similar to social workers
 - More community supports that support the whole person and family
- Eliminate program barriers (transportation, cost, documentation, etc.)

SOLUTIONS TO RECONNECTING WITH SCHOOL

- School should be more individualized and career based. School should evolve with the skills of students and workforce needs and should offer practical skills. Provide a very tangible outcome of participation
- Create more programs to support high school drop outs
 - Opportunities to work, earn money, support family, or family supports
 - Share success stories, from those who have been through similar situations
 - Positive regard from adult mentors, teachers, and others that have influence
 - Need bigger community centers with fun, skills, resources, homework help
- Reform systems that work against Undocumented Youth
 - Permission to work part-time for students attending school
 - Expand DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), which currently takes 7 years: sometimes kids had to leave the country when their parents were deported and because they haven't lived here continually they can't access DACA
 - Keep families together (stop deporting parents of kids with citizenship)
 - Make programs accessible to ALL young people regardless of citizenship
- Improve literacy and offer help learning English
- More options like alternative and vocational schools
 - School should be more individualized and career based. School should evolve with the skills of students and workforce needs.
- Improve follow through from programs and administration
- More social workers in schools
- Ensure that school administration and teachers truly care

SOLUTIONS TO CONNECTING WITH EMPLOYMENT

- More nonprofits should be located inside the schools that help students gain work experience
- More programs (work training, job readiness, earn and learn) and more support for existing ones, opportunities to still work and finish high school and receive positive feedback and build confidence
- Know what kind of jobs are available, what there is to choose from, how to get there
- Would be nice to see online, see what is close by that matches
- There should be a program or a class that helps you with interview skills
- Access to case management (someone to walk you through all the steps from creating a resume, to the job search, interview, how to get a uniform, and how to fill out paperwork, with regular check-ins)
- Provide opportunity and open doors, in the field practice