

Both Sides Now:

*New Directions in
Promoting Work
and Learning for
Disadvantaged Youth*

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Executive Summary

Both Sides Now: New Directions in Promoting Work and Learning for Disadvantaged Youth

A Report to the Annie E. Casey Foundation

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The mission of the Annie E. Casey Foundation is “to improve life outcomes for disadvantaged children and families.” In pursuing this goal, the Foundation has become increasingly aware of the need to address more directly the underlying causes of the poverty that human and social service systems seek to ameliorate.

Historically, strategies to address poverty in the United States have taken two distinct approaches. The dominant approach has focused on the supply side of the labor market—the skills and other characteristics of the poor. The less common approach has focused on the demand side of the labor market—the characteristics of firms and industries and their wage and hiring practices. This view emphasizes the great dependence of earnings upon the jobs and industries to which workers have access.

Refusing to choose between these two approaches, the Casey Foundation has made a commitment to exploring strategies that address both sides of the labor market simultaneously. As part of this effort, the Foundation asked Jobs for the Future to help its staff think about the range of policies and practices which, if better coordinated and implemented, might help young people succeed in the labor market and in life. This report culminates that effort. In the following pages, we:

- Define what “work preparation” requires in today’s competitive economy;
- Identify five interrelated barriers to success facing young people, particularly disadvantaged urban youth;
- Review the lessons from research and practice on strategies to address those barriers;
- Highlight innovative strategies for helping to improve both the landscape of economic and social opportunities within which young people choose their futures and the skills and abilities young people need to succeed in the labor market today; and
- Recommend priorities for the field and for funders, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in this redefined arena of work preparation.

Our concern is primarily with those in greatest need. Three groups in particular have seen their career prospects worsen in recent decades and are experiencing serious problems in the labor market: high school dropouts; high school graduates (or those who earned a General Equivalency Diploma) who have not continued their education; and in-school youth who are likely to drop out or end their formal education without a postsecondary credential.

Schools, informal youth organizations, community-based employment and training providers, and churches are among the places where youth can learn with and from adults and each other. But if these institutions are weak and ineffective, either singly or as a system, many young people will continue to be mired in failure, frustration, and poor performance in the labor market.

Such weaknesses are often significant. The problem is not a lack of will or desire among those who work with young people. Nor is the lack of impressive program models the primary obstacle. Rather, youth-serving professionals and individual programs operate within institutions, bureaucracies, and service-delivery systems that are embattled and deeply troubled. Several problems surface again and again: fragmented services, uncoordinated funding streams, and conflicting regulations; inadequate resources for responsive, effective service delivery; and insufficient training and development opportunities for youth-serving staff.

Lessons from Research and Practice: What Works?

Research and practice provide some important guidance on strategies to overcome these five work preparation challenges facing many urban youth. Although the research base is uneven and less conclusive than one would want, there is a growing consensus among researchers and practitioners on promising approaches to addressing both the skill development needs and the landscape of opportunity facing urban young people.

Efforts to Address Barriers Related to Employment Opportunities and Economic Development

While rigorous research on the effectiveness of targeted economic development programs is almost non-existent, several lessons emerge from the experience of the past few decades. First, reaching any significant degree of scale in job creation will require a variety of approaches which not only include self-employment and microenterprise development, but also emphasize business retention, small-business expansion, and limited business recruitment. Second, economic development efforts are more likely to benefit low-income individuals when they are targeted to industries where the demand for entry and other sub-baccalaureate level jobs is high.

Three other conclusions can be drawn from past practice in local economic development. Resources should be targeted to businesses and industries that export goods and services outside the community, since they have the potential to generate more local jobs than do retail activities. Similarly, economic development strategies must look beyond neighborhood boundaries to the opportunities in and the dynamics of the regional economy, so that job- and resource-poor urban communities can benefit from the regional engines of job growth and not be forced to generate wealth and opportunity internally. Finally, strong and savvy community-based organizations are needed to advocate for and serve as intermediaries for local residents if urban neighborhoods and their residents are to benefit significantly from local economic development efforts.

Efforts to Address Barriers Related to Families and Neighborhoods

The most effective family-strengthening policies for the poor would be policies that increase family members' employment and earnings. In general, though, family-strengthening programs—including family support, family preservation, and teen parenting—focus on providing assistance to parents so they can better cope with stress, help their children develop, and keep their families together.

Family support programs help parents form functional and emotional attachments to other parents with the goal of improving their own parenting skills and their ability to find employment. Innovative programs help parents develop personal networks that enable them to solve family problems and increase family cohesion. *Family preservation programs* address the challenges facing parents who risk losing their children to foster care or other supervised placements. Evaluations of these interventions yield no firm conclusions on effectiveness. Both these strategies appear to be more common and more effective for families with young children than for those with adolescents.

Teen-parenting initiatives, by design, are comprehensive efforts to deal with the many hurdles standing between teen mothers and self-sufficiency. Evidence of the effectiveness of these programs is inconclusive. One carefully evaluated program produced moderately better outcomes after five years on measures

that included employment, welfare receipt, and parenting skills; the 18-month impacts of another program targeting a more disadvantaged group of teen parents found little progress after eighteen months on most outcomes.

In recent years, foundations frustrated with the fragmented approaches and small-scale impacts of strategies to improve the economic well-being of urban neighborhoods and their residents have seeded a new generation of initiatives. Known as *comprehensive community initiatives*, these comprehensive approaches to neighborhood-building are designed to combine, coordinate, and achieve synergies among various community-level systems and program interventions: social services and supports, health care, mental health, job training, leadership development.

While the evaluation of comprehensive community initiatives poses great challenges, early assessments emphasize that the best ones combine activities in the social, economic, and physical spheres. Other lessons from researchers and practitioners highlight the following principles: "community building" and community participation play a critical role; poor communities need financial, political, and technical resources that lie outside the community; activities in both the private and nonprofit sectors must complement improvements in public-sector support systems; and change requires sustained investment over a long period of time.

Efforts to Address Barriers Related to Employer Attitudes and Behaviors

Efforts to change employer attitudes and behaviors regarding certain employee groups have primarily been of two kinds: those generated by employers themselves and those pressed upon employers by adversarial community groups.

Employers have acquired significant experience with efforts to value and promote diversity through training for management, supervisors, and front-line workers. While little evaluation has been done of these interventions, the business community apparently believe the results are worth the price. A healthy industry has emerged that provides businesses with consulting services on the legal, management, and interpersonal issues associated with bias in recruiting, hiring, and management.

The second approach is typically more confrontational: community pressure on employers to hire from certain neighborhoods, or give hiring preference to black or other ethnic groups. Examples include campaigns to require employers on government-funded public works projects to give hiring preference to local residents or public pressure on individual firms (e.g., Coca-Cola, Texaco) to change their hiring practices. Some organizations have conducted or sponsored "hiring audits" to dramatize racial disparities in the hiring practices of local employers. Again, little evaluation has been done on these interventions.

Traditional youth employment or youth development programs have only slight experience with strategies to increase employer sensitivity to young people from different groups, or for altering employer practices through dialogue and education. Programs that link schools with employers and provide work experience for participating young people have generated training opportunities for supervisors and human resource professionals that begin to address employer attitudes and behaviors. There is experiential evidence of changes in the attitudes of managers in participating firms; however, systematic evaluations have yet to emerge.

Work Preparation Strategies: Ten Lessons from Research and Practice

In comparison to other fields, employment and training initiatives for the disadvantaged have a rich tradition of rigorous evaluation research. While the popular assessment of these studies is that "nothing works," this is a misreading of the evidence. Moreover, when combined with insights from practitioners in the field, the literature on both youth employment and school-based, career-oriented education programs yields important "do's and don'ts" for the design and delivery of work preparation efforts for young people and adults.

A consensus is emerging, based on evidence from programs and policies over the past thirty years. This consensus can be summarized in ten lessons that should inform the next generation of work preparation policy and practice. At the top of the list are two overarching conclusions:

- **Modest interventions are likely to have modest and short-lived impacts on people's lives and their ability to succeed in the labor market.** Because of funding constraints and political pressures to spread limited resources to reach more participants, youth employment and training programs tend to be relatively short and isolated interventions, lacking continuity of service or comprehensiveness. Common sense, as well as research, argues that effective youth programming—both in-school and out-of-school—must be intensive, continuous, and varied.
- **Second-class systems yield second-class results.** The youth employment and training system in this country has often been called the "second-chance" system. However, it has tended too often to be a "second-class system," with standards of achievement too low to impart adequate skills and to win employer support. Programs for in-school and out-of-school youth must aim toward the same long-term goal: mastery of challenging academic standards and career-related competencies that enable all participants to advance and succeed in both postsecondary education and career employment. This requires all learning and work preparation programs to be part of a linked system of opportunities that can help individuals move progressively and sequentially toward credentials with value in the labor market.

A second group of findings relates to pedagogy—to teaching methods that hold promise as core elements of learning programs for disadvantaged youth.

- **Traditional didactic teaching methods fail significant numbers of young people, in particular many students from disadvantaged, minority, and immigrant households.** More and more education and training reformers agree on the motivational power of active learning that emphasizes an individual's own experiences and provides opportunities for students to discover, create, explore, and find meaning through self-directed efforts. For those who have had difficulties in traditional learning settings, active, experiential instructional and learning methods can be powerful aids to the development of confidence and competence.
- **Work is a powerful motivator and catalyst for learning and effort when provided in a supportive, learning-rich context. Work experience and academic rigor must be combined if work-based learning is to be of maximum benefit to young people.** This conclusion reflects findings from research and practice on the limitations of strategies that focus on either one or the other and from suggestive results of efforts to integrate the two in adult learning, school-to-work programs, and other school- and community-based youth initiatives.

A third set of lessons revolves around basic design principles for improving program effectiveness. Successful programs tend to emphasize: a close connection to the labor market; attention to the developmental needs of different age groups; and the central importance of relationships with competent, caring adults.

- **A strong, direct connection to, and understanding of, the local labor market and its employers is critical.** In the past, there has been too little direct interaction and sharing between youth-serving organizations and the employers they hope will hire their students or clients. The better acquainted the staff of schools and community-based organizations are with the dynamics of the local labor market, the growing and contracting of employment sectors, the needs of local employers, and the organizations that represent employers in the regional economy, the more effective programs are likely to be in preparing young people for work and careers.
- **Work preparation strategies must take into account the developmental needs of young people and provide activities and services that address those needs.** Even the most world-weary youths are working their way, at their own speed, with their own advances and retreats, through a natural developmental process with physical, psychological, and social dimensions. Programs will be more effective at motivating and retaining participants if they are customized to appeal to the priorities and needs of the particular age group they serve.

- **Strong relationships with competent, caring adults are essential.** Young people, particularly those who have had few positive role models in their families or communities, need help learning to make, maintain, and use such relationships. The research on this point is powerful: the specifics of program design can vary greatly, provided that meaningful and reliable adult relationships are a central program element.

Finally, three deceptively simple, yet quite important, implementation lessons emerge from research and practice.

- **The impacts of program design on different population subgroups vary greatly, with males tending to benefit less than females from past efforts.** Because of different pressures and assessments of relative costs and benefits of participation, male and female participants tend to differ in their response to particular program designs. Programs should consider customization to address the different life situations, needs, attitudes, and goals of participating males and females.
- **Quality of implementation matters greatly.** Research has shown that efforts to replicate the same program in different communities can have wildly different outcomes, depending upon the quality of implementation. For this reason, opportunities for quality staff development cannot be overemphasized.
- **It takes time for results to appear.** Research has found that, for some work preparation programs, positive outcomes did not begin to emerge until several years after participation. For young people, in particular, changes in attitudes and behaviors can lag significantly. Issues of trust are critically important to motivation and performance. Moreover, because of the nature of the youth labor market, employment and economic outcomes may not appear until their transition is made to the adult labor market.

Priorities for the Field—and for Funders

Despite the apparent consensus on directions for future efforts, the fact remains that most work preparation programs targeted to urban youth have had disappointing results. For most participants,

these interventions have done little to advance their educational credentials or earnings, or to change their life prospects. Where bright spots exist, they are small, unique, driven by exceptional leaders, and often sustained with extraordinary funding.

This should surprise no one. Most workforce preparation strategies for disadvantaged young people have been doomed from the start, plagued by serious constraints and shortcomings. They have tended to be too modest, short-term, and discontinuous. And they have tended to focus on a limited range of skill deficiencies, underestimating the importance of the other barriers to success that cannot be overcome by efforts to change the characteristics of individuals.

Based on the research and practical wisdom summarized above, we believe that the next generation of work preparation interventions targeted to urban youth will have to be broadened in two ways. First, supply-side efforts will have to be linked to strategies that address the other components of the “web of mutually reinforcing circumstances and behaviors” that make labor market success difficult. Second, supply-side approaches must themselves reach beyond narrowly-defined skill-building curricula, delivered with traditional classroom methods, to incorporate lessons from research and practice on the power of experiential pedagogy, work experience, and connections to adults. Fortunately, there are some guideposts from existing practice. Innovations will be required in three broad arenas: (1) strategies that address the economic and social landscape of opportunity facing urban youth; (2) strategies to improve the design and delivery of skill-related interventions; and (3) strategies for improving community-level partnerships that can help link demand-side and supply-side approaches into a coherent system of opportunities, services, and supports.

Strategies that Address the Economic and Social Landscape of Opportunity

Job creation, access, and quality: In the absence of a major public employment program, relatively modest demand-side strategies have shown some promise, such as strategies that encourage business formation, particularly in industry sectors that are growing

regionally and generate relatively well-paying entry-level jobs, and transportation strategies that get inner-city residents to where the jobs are in the suburban area. Other promising strategies include aggressive local hiring agreements with employers, particularly on government-funded development projects; employment-brokering services that reduce employer costs for recruitment, screening, and hiring while providing workers with guidance and support to get and hold a job; leveraging employment opportunities that still exist in low-income neighborhoods, including medical, social, and human service jobs; and enriching existing jobs so they can serve as stepping stones to higher skill employment.

Employer attitudes and behaviors: Despite much rhetoric, relatively little attention has been paid to strategies to engage employers in meaningful work-related relationships with urban youth, both in-school and out-of-school. Nevertheless, at least three approaches appear promising: (1) lessening the costs and risks for employers (through the strengthening of intermediary organizations that can aggregate employer interests and reduce their individual costs); (2) targeting receptive employer groups, including those with entry- and technician-level labor shortages, employers of teenage workers, and minority-owned firms; and (3) changing employer perceptions and biases about young people, particularly minority males, through approaches such as creation of a diversity management “extension service” for small and medium-sized businesses, dialogue among employers and minority males, post-placement follow-up services that help new workers adjust to workplace realities, and studies of hiring practices to raise community and employer awareness.

Strategies to Improve the Design and Delivery of Skill-Related Interventions

Given the weakened demand for low-skill labor across the economy and in cities in particular, supply-side strategies to improve the skills of urban youth are critically important. Such interventions must become more rigorous to match changing employer demand—and they must address not simply technical training for specific jobs but also basic academic preparation in literacy, numeracy, and computer skills, and, importantly, socialization and motivation.

In our field research for this study, we found that successful work preparation programs serving disadvantaged in-school and out-of school youth embrace a common set of design principles and incorporate them in their programs. These principles include the centrality of work-based learning, an active and experiential pedagogy, an emphasis on youth development, strong relationships with adults and peers, support that is consistent and effective over time, and rigorous standards that both postsecondary institutions and employers respect.

At the same time, many challenges remain if the urban population’s most at-risk youth are to be adequately served by supply-side education and work preparation efforts. Two deserve special attention: (1) the need for more effective linkages between the second-chance and mainstream education system, and (2) the need to develop strategies, initiatives, and supports targeted to young men of color.

Linking the second-chance and mainstream education systems: Ultimately, reform efforts will have to tackle the systemic challenge of creating and strengthening the links between the second-chance and the mainstream educational systems. This reintegrated system would not require individual programs to converge in their length, academic rigor, content, or target population. It *would* require them to specify where they lead—that is, to identify the next rungs on the ladder. And it would require collaboration among a diverse set of institutions (including firms, unions, community-based organizations, and schools), specifying expectations about the content and quality of programs feeding to higher rungs.

Targeting efforts to young males of color: The evidence is unequivocal: young urban males of color confront a particularly complex set of obstacles to development and advancement in school, work, and family life, and they are falling behind in the economic race to succeed. Strategies to improve the economic and social well-being of urban children and families must pay special attention to the challenges faced by this group.

Staff from programs visited for this study consistently emphasized two obstacles to their ability to serve minority males effectively. One is the shortage

of resources. The other is engaging young men enough to attract them to, and keep them attending, work preparation programs. Our research identified several ways to make participation more attractive: combine earning and learning, provide role models from the community, prepare young males of color to deal with workplace culture, and provide access to support networks beyond those traditionally available in work preparation programs.

Implications for Community Partnerships and Local Governance

To move in the directions advocated in this report requires new approaches to planning and governing local anti-poverty efforts. The supply-side proposals require new partnerships among employers, educational institutions, and training providers. Demand-side efforts addressing the “landscape of opportunity” for youth require the engagement of additional interests—economic development agencies, banks and other sources of capital, public housing authorities, and the range of local and regional employers. To provide new economic opportunities, skill development services, and supports that can help the most at-risk populations participate fully in these options will require new and more comprehensive forums for community collaboration and coordination.

This area requires much experimentation, for there is a very thin experience base with such complex organizational forums and planning and governance structures. Whatever the ultimate form of these initiatives, community efforts to improve young people’s work preparation will have to solve several collaborative challenges. For example, it will be necessary to identify the key constituencies that must be engaged, along with efficient, inclusive approaches to bringing them to the table. A common vision will need to be crafted for work preparation and how it links to other efforts to help young people and their families succeed. Other design priorities include: building the capacity of local actors to plan community-wide partnerships; specifying and coordinating a continuum of services; creating an accountability system to ensure that all young people have access to information and services that can help them advance; and finding ways to overcome the limitations of categorical funding streams and turf battles.

Priorities for Strategic Grantmaking

Given this ambitious, but necessary, agenda, what should be the priorities of funders such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation? The answer to this question must take into account not only the state of the field, as assessed above, but also the current political moment.

This report is written at a time of great change in American politics and policies. The federal welfare system has been replaced by grants to the states built around time limits and work requirements. Federal employment and training dollars, particularly for at-risk youth, have suffered significant cuts. Programs and funds that were once directed at the federal level are devolving to the states.

Many state and local policymakers and practitioners look to the future with trepidation, fearing reduced resources, heightened turf wars, and less effective services. Yet, there is guarded hope that a more locally responsive, coherent, and effective system might ultimately emerge.

This moment provides a chance to redesign basic operating assumptions that have guided education and employment and training initiatives for disadvantaged youth—to think systemically and not just programmatically. It is a moment when incremental program innovation is insufficient. What is needed is a long-term public campaign for youth.

In such a campaign, philanthropic organizations can play a catalytic leadership role. A long-term, strategic foundation initiative can contribute significantly in four areas: public engagement, public policy, research, and local practice. In an era of increasingly scarce public resources, it would be preferable for such an effort to be launched and promoted collaboratively by a group of influential national foundations that are already committed to improving the prospects of disadvantaged youth and families.

Public Engagement: Foundations can help alter the public discourse around poor youth and their economic prospects through concerted public engagement and media campaigns, convenings of decision and opinion makers, publications, and new research agendas. They can work both to change public perceptions about young people and to change the way youth problems are defined.

Public Policy: Increasingly, the ability of localities to innovate and to serve urban youth will depend on guidance, resources, and restrictions from state officials. To help protect the promising policy innovations of the past and to advance new directions for the future, foundations should encourage efforts that address national and state level policies simultaneously. On the one hand, foundations should promote a compelling national vision and role in the area of youth work preparation policy. One way to do this would be to create and convene an influential forum whose charge would be to develop a new policy consensus. In addition, though, foundations should encourage efforts to monitor and shape state-level policies that have an impact on both the career options and the skill development opportunities available to less advantaged urban youth. Foundations must insist that their funds continue to leverage innovation and improvement, not substitute for base support from the public sector.

Research on Practice and Policy: Credible arguments for resources and policies cannot be made to the public, policymakers, or ourselves without better definitions of success, and clearer explanations of why some interventions are more effective than others. Foundations should continue to promote knowledge development and more strategic use of existing research on program outcomes, community-level change, and the impact on individuals and communities of different social policy innovations.

The Quality and Impact of Local Practice: At the local level, foundations must continue to encourage and promote “visions of the possible” that can motivate innovators across the country and provide evidence for policymakers that new approaches can work. Foundation support should be targeted to both program improvement and systemic reform.

- Program support can provide venture capital for innovative programs that embody the principles highlighted in this study. Foundations should encourage efforts that define skill-development approaches broadly and strengthen the links between supply-side and demand-side approaches to improving youth employment and earnings.
- Systemic support is needed because individual, isolated programs can only accomplish so much. To reach any significant scale, local actors need help designing mechanisms for effective collaboration and comprehensive approaches to urban and community revitalization.

It will be a long journey from where we as a nation are today to a time when policy and practice in the preparation of disadvantaged urban youth for economic success approaches the vision in this report. Yet, the map toward that future is becoming clear—as are the priority targets of opportunity for both the field and for funders. Jobs for the Future hopes that this report helps the Annie E. Casey Foundation and others move productively toward creating a better future for our nation’s most disadvantaged youth and young adults.

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