



CITIES DEVELOP NEW STRATEGIES FOR REENGAGING DROPOUTS, BOOSTING HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES

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When thinking about the more than one million young people nationwide who drop out of school each year, it is easy to assume that school is the last place they want to be. A growing number of cities are questioning this assumption, however, and increasingly finding that for many recent dropouts it is just plain wrong.

City, school and community leaders from 17 cities gathered in Denver last week to share ideas and lessons learned in the development of "reengagement centers," one of the newest and most exciting models for helping dropouts come back to school and thereby boosting high school graduation rates. The peer learning session for NLC's Dropout Reengagement Network was hosted by the NLC Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) in collaboration with the City of Denver and the nonprofit Colorado Youth for a Change, and was made possible through the generous financial support of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. The inaugural meeting of the network, held late last year in Boston, featured the innovative reengagement centers established through a partnership between the City of Boston, Boston Public Schools and the Boston Private Industry Council.

Reengagement centers share a common goal of bringing recent dropouts back into an appropriate school or alternative education program and helping them complete high school. Some cities have pursued this goal by establishing a central location for the entire community or opening multiple centers in target neighborhoods where young people can get the advice and support they need to reenroll in school. Other cities have opted for "virtual" reengagement centers that forge critical connections and make referrals to schools or alternative programs that can respond to each individual's needs. All of these approaches rely upon direct and extensive outreach efforts to contact recent dropouts, identify the reasons why they have left school, and involve them in creating a plan for resuming their education.

Denver's Reengagement Efforts

Mayor Michael B. Hancock welcomed the network to Denver with a compelling explanation of why he sees the dropout problem as central to the economic challenges facing his city. He offered three reasons for developing effective reengagement strategies: it is the right thing to do, it is too costly to ignore the problem, and investments in children and youth that close the achievement gap are also a key means of narrowing the gap between worker skills and the jobs that we need to fill.

"By developing reengagement strategies, we remind young people that they matter, that they're important to the fabric of our city," Mayor Hancock declared. When meeting with business and community groups, Mayor Hancock often asks the audience to name a single economic problem facing the city that isn't in some way connected to the goal of making sure everyone graduates from high school. The response, he says, is almost invariably silence.

In Colorado, dropout reengagement is often more of a process rather than a physical center or location. Jefferson County Public Schools has set up an internal district office to focus on reengagement and crafted new procedures regarding student exits from high school.

Denver Public Schools, working through Colorado Youth for a Change, now reaches out to dropouts within the first 24 hours of formal exit from high school. An expanded number of schools offering more intensive student supports, along with engagement or multiple pathway centers for some students, provide more options within Denver Public Schools for recent dropouts to find a school environment that meets their needs.

Common Challenges and Learning Curves

Because the reengagement center approach is still quite new, the network's discussions covered a wide range of topics that reflect fundamental policy choices as well as emerging or ongoing operational challenges. Issues addressed in peer learning sessions throughout the two-day convening included:

- Innovations and new approaches to outreach and engagement;
- Strategies for creating or expanding multiple pathways to graduation;
- Reengaging special populations and young men of color;
- Promising approaches for increasing retention and persistence after reenrollment;
- Professional development and other measures to support reengagement staff;
- Sustaining dropout reengagement efforts over time; and
- Engaging key partners and aligning plans with other key city agendas and priorities.

In exploring issues related to young men of color, a number of cities expressed interest in using their reengagement centers to provide technical assistance to staff, teachers, social workers and others in the community on effective dropout recovery strategies for this population.

Participants also discussed the importance of having local data in order to understand better how to develop a targeted approach for young men of color. In October 2012, the YEF Institute released a new NLC guide for city officials, *Municipal Leadership to Promote Black Male Achievement*, which describes the critical role that data can play in informing local efforts and presents options for improving outcomes in the areas of education, work, and family.

While some of the participants in the Denver meeting are exploring options for opening new reengagement centers in their communities, many of the cities represented already have innovative efforts underway. In addition to Boston and Denver, reengagement centers are operating in Dayton, Los Angeles, Newark, New York City, Omaha, Philadelphia and Portland, Oregon. Chicago's first centers will begin operations next month. The emerging models and lessons in these and other cities offer hope for a rapidly expanding network of similar initiatives across the nation.

The task at hand could not be more urgent. As one reengaged student at the Aurora (Colorado) Futures Academy noted during a site visit by network members, "At my high school, no one was paying attention to my absences until I got a call from [the school]." Many school dropouts can be convinced to resume their high school education, but often it will not happen without the outreach and support that reengagement centers provide. When city and school partners work together to ensure that young people who have left school feel wanted and welcomed, are engaged in discussions about the importance of education to their futures, and have access to programs and services that respond to their needs, it can make all the difference.

Details: For more information regarding NLC's Dropout Reengagement Network, contact Andrew Moore, senior fellow at the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, at moore@nlc.org or 215/848-6910. For more information about NLC's young men of color initiatives, contact Leon Andrews, senior fellow at the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, at andrews@nlc.org or 202/626-3039. Additional information regarding the Institute's offerings and peer learning networks can be found at www.nlc.org/iyef.