

# Back Together Again

Reengaging K-12 Students Through  
District-Community Collaboration

by Leslie Rennie-Hill

October, 2018

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*The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions'* mission is to support community collaboration—including collective impact—that enables communities to effectively address their most pressing challenges. The Forum for Community Solutions works to accomplish this mission by pursuing four complementary strategies including: 1) building awareness by documenting and lifting up impactful strategies and stories of success; 2) mobilizing stakeholders through knowledge and network development; 3) removing barriers by advocating for effective policy; and 4) catalyzing investment by encouraging funder partnerships.

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By Leslie Rennie-Hill

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## **About the Author**

An educator for over forty years, Leslie Rennie-Hill has served in a variety of roles: secondary school teacher and administrator, university graduate school faculty member, Director of Programs for a community-based educational non-profit, Chief of High Schools for an urban district, technical assistance consultant and team leader for several national high school reform initiatives sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and by foundations, and researcher. Most recently her work has focused on projects aimed at engaging students on the margins and creating multiple pathways to adult success.

## **Acknowledgements**

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# Executive Summary

**W**hen students leave school lacking credits for a high school credential, they often don't have any idea where, or even if, there is a door to get back in. Such disengaged students, known as opportunity youth, need help navigating their way back on track. Nationally many communities are establishing reengagement centers or systems to meet the needs of these disconnected youth by reaching out, and offering assessments, referrals, and other supports for a transition to an educational pathway of some sort – a high school diploma, GED, community college, apprenticeship, internship, and/or industry certification. Young people face a myriad of situations when they do not fit easily into the one-size fits all design of most high schools, and their social, emotional, economic and physical needs extend beyond what can be met readily by teachers or a school counselor in many typical comprehensive high schools.

No one right way exists to reengage students and there is no single best way to run a reengagement system or program. Nevertheless, some communities are making significant inroads by developing a range of models that capitalize on local resources and opportunities. This report focuses on four such communities where the local school districts are an integral reengagement partner from the start and describes what it takes for a school district-community partnership to succeed in reengaging students. It includes descriptions of these four exemplar communities: Portland OR, Boston MA, Dubuque IA, and South King County (suburban Seattle) WA, which all exemplify new, non-linear ways partners meet their own organizational needs and interests while also jointly meeting the wide-ranging needs of youth.

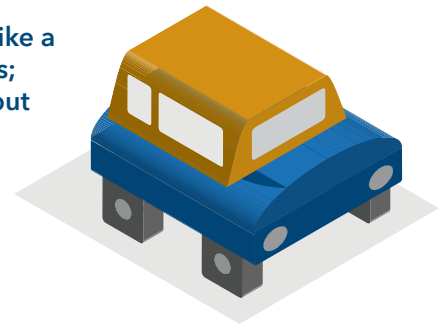
## Challenges to Collaboration

Effective reengagement requires building a second chance system that connects schooling options with a variety of supports, knitting together systems and funding streams. To do so involves creativity, authenticity, persistence and courage among all parties. And that work is not always easy.

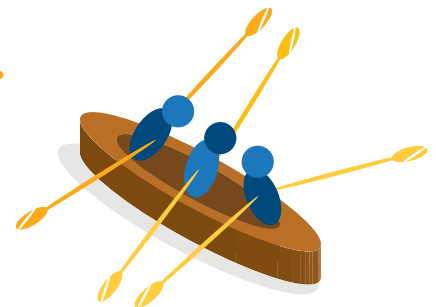
During a feedback session, communities described their district-community partnerships in terms of these telling metaphors:



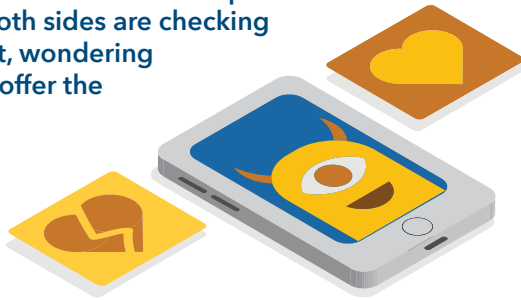
**Our partnership is like a car with square tires; the ride is bumpy, but we do get there.**



**We are an undaunted rowing team that can brave all kinds of weather, but we are not always rowing in sync or the same direction.**



Both the school district and the community are on a dating app where the district looks like a mysterious behemoth of a potential partner and both sides are checking each other out, wondering what one can offer the other.

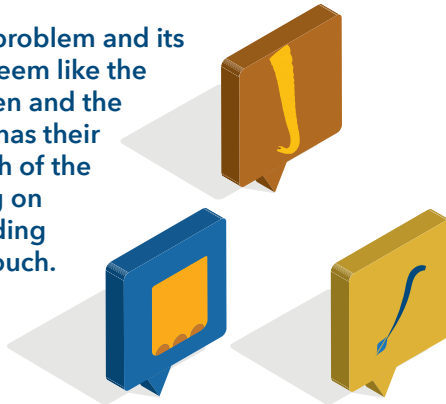


## Solutions

Some common themes around how to partner effectively together and design effective reengagement approaches emerged across the four communities featured in this report. The themes reflect places where partners noted how they are moving ahead collaboratively to modify established practices and ways of working, potentially setting the stage for future policy shifts.

### SET IT UP RIGHT

The reengagement problem and its potential solutions seem like the fable of the blind men and the elephant: everyone has their own take on the truth of the situation, depending on where they are standing and what they can touch.



In spite of these varying challenges to collaboration, communities are actively innovating as they search together for best practice when serving reengaged students.

- **Districts and community partners recommend shifting processes and practices *before* policies.** Rather than seeking district policy changes that would officially dictate new rules, school leaders at the system and building levels strive to shift internal practices and processes as they are warranted by evidence of progress in the right direction.
- **Define the problem well.** By analyzing who disconnects from school including their age, credits earned, grade level, and school attended, leaders create smarter plans tailored to their communities.
- **By analyzing students' histories of disconnection and reengagement and by listening to youth themselves, critical information can be gleaned to inform system improvement.** Youth have stories to tell: when adults listen, they learn what to fix and why.
- **When funding strands can be braided together, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.** Partners strategically leverage workforce dollars, state per student allocations, and social services supports deciding who can fund what under which conditions to meet students' needs.

“The most important thing I’ve learned about reengagement work is that you have to start before you’re ready.”

– Former Superintendent

## PROGRAM DESIGN MATTERS

- **Match student needs with a pathway to future school and work success.** A ‘best fit’ approach matching students’ needs with school strengths, culture, and opportunities works well. Communities use a combination of district reengagement options and others run by community non-profits and/or community colleges to complement their traditional high schools.
- **Teachers of reengaging youth benefit from tailored professional development.** When youth need to catch up quickly and fill in learning gaps, teachers need to hone sophisticated new skills to make sure students achieve.
- **Reengagement Centers report serving disproportionate numbers of special education students; districts struggle to provide the services and certified staff required legally to serve them.** Districts are creating ways to meet federal mandates by ensuring central office oversight guides teaching at reengagement centers, and district staff can regularly consult or work at both reengagement centers and other schools.

**efforts to reengage youth.** Designed to encourage school-community partnerships, Washington’s Open Doors policy allocates funding for reengaged students and offers guidance for implementation.

## Conclusion

While preventing disengagement will always be a goal of school districts, facing the reality that some youth will disengage from school is essential. If district and community leaders, in partnership, seek to actively learn why students disengage, then systems can improve performance and youth will be well-served.

The communities consulted for this report expressed optimism that progress is being made. Acknowledging there is always more to learn, they encouraged the sharing of good ideas and welcomed the support of thought partners who can help communities work smarter.

## POLICIES MAKE A DIFFERENCE

- **District and community reengagement partnerships seek accountability frameworks that accurately reflect the scope and details of the problems to be addressed and what it really takes to successfully get youth back on track.** To measure reengagement success, partners monitor academic progress, persistence, school attendance, success at the next level of school or career, and more.
- **Washington State’s state-level reengagement policy can inform other states seeking to incentivize community**



# Introduction

While a sophomore in high school, Hector shouldered family responsibilities including bringing home what he earned at his part-time job at a local café and making sure his younger brother and sister got to school on time with lunches in hand. Born in the US, although his parents were not, the family lived in tension and uncertainty, worried that their legal immigration status might change. Torn between wanting to join his friends skipping school and meeting his more adult responsibilities, Hector made tough choices between school and friends, and friends won out. He quit school. A reengagement coach saw his name on a list of dropouts and reached out to Hector personally, meeting him several times at a café. Over time Hector came to believe that he could finish high school and succeed. With a plan including ways to catch up on high school credits, earn college credits at the same time, continue his part-time job, and meet with a counselor, Hector is well on his way to a bachelor's degree and maybe law school afterwards.

The stories of Hector and the other young people highlighted throughout this report are real; their names are not. Their stories represent a small sample of the myriad situations young people face as they navigate high school and their personal lives. These students did not fit easily into the one-size fits all design of most high schools, and their social, emotional, economic and physical needs extended beyond what could be met readily by teachers or a school counselor. Their stories point to the essential role that reengagement centers can play to give students the boost and guidance needed to get back on track, particularly when a reengagement center partners effectively with school districts and community organizations.

No one right way exists to reengage students. Nevertheless, some communities are making significant inroads by developing a range of models that capitalize on local resources and opportunities. Often the impetus for a reengagement initiative stems from civic leaders and/or the business community, and school district leaders enter the discussions after problems have been identified and plans of action begun. This report focuses on sites where the local school district is an integral reengagement partner

from the start, describing what it takes for a school district-community partnership to reengage students. It includes descriptions of various strategies and indicators of progress, referencing four exemplar communities with successful track records reengaging their students. The four places featured are: Portland OR, Boston MA, Dubuque IA, and South King County (suburban Seattle) WA.

The partnership examples referenced in this report sit on the intersection between schools and community organizations, revealing what it takes to work in sync for a common purpose. They exemplify new, non-linear ways partners meet their own organizational needs and interests while also jointly meeting the wide-ranging needs of youth cautiously deciding to try again, to face their challenges, to believe in themselves, and to take their first steps toward future success.

Information for this report came from a variety of sources: interviews with district and community leaders in the four featured communities; three focus groups with reengaged youth; a focus group with ten members of the Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions Opportunity Youth Forum; and survey responses from members of the

Opportunity Youth Forum. It is grounded in up-to-date data on reengagement efforts across the U.S. including information from the National League of Cities Reengagement Network (NLC REN), which offers a forum for leaders at many established and emerging programs, connecting all to developing practices, supports, and funding opportunities. Many of the NLC REN promising practices align with the examples provided here.

Funding for this report comes from the Raikes Foundation, a Seattle-based philanthropic organization investing to support and empower all youth, especially those on the margins.

“Dropout has a common meaning. Kids know the way the world looks at them and the way they look at themselves - the feelings, emotions, what it means. People look at you like you’re a failure and even if they don’t say it you feel it.”

– Outreach Specialist quoting a reengaged student

# Chapter 1

## The Urgent Need to Reengage Youth



Over the past 10-15 years, national educational, business and civic leaders have increasingly recognized the problems associated with disengaged (or “disconnected”) youth, voicing concerns about the sobering data related to youth who have no clear path to a productive future. Opportunity youth, defined as young people aged 16-24 who are neither working nor in school, number 4.6 million according to a 2018 report from Measure of America.<sup>1</sup> Nationally in 2013 1.8 million opportunity youth aged 16-21 were not enrolled in school and had not finished their high school education, and that number, although somewhat lower today, stubbornly persists.<sup>2</sup> Most of these youth are unemployed: they lack necessary job skills or training, and jobs for which they qualify are decreasing in number. Youth “disconnection” is estimated to cost taxpayers \$93.7 billion (2011 dollars) in government support and lost tax revenue.<sup>3</sup>

Under the federal education legislation guiding school district policy and practice, first in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and subsequently now in Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), school districts have tracked their dropout rates. America’s Promise summarizes the known facts about youth without a high school credential: they are more likely to be unemployed, earn less income, have worse health, not be civically engaged, are more likely to become involved with the criminal justice system and require social services.<sup>4</sup> Disproportionate numbers of Black and Hispanic students, students living in poverty and other vulnerable populations are more likely to be off-track.<sup>5</sup>

To track school system success, NCLB and ESSA require documentation of the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), calculated by identifying the cohort of first time 9th graders in a particular school year and then adjusting the cohort by transfers in or out. The ACGR represents the percentage of the 9th grade cohort who graduate within 4 years

with a high school diploma. In some locations a 5-year ACGR is also reported. Some encouraging progress has occurred: in 2011, no state reported a 90% ACGR and only nine were above 85% and in 2016 two states reported above 90% and 25 were above 85%.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the slowly climbing graduation rates and the low unemployment rate, the number of opportunity youth remains large. When a student drops out of high school, finding a way back in is not easy. Students don’t know what to do or how to do it, where to go or whom to talk to. If they lag far behind their peers, earning a high school diploma can seem like a mountain too tall to climb.

Communities across the US are reaching out to opportunity youth. Reframing the problem, they reject the term “dropout” or “disconnected” with their negative connotations and refer to those students as opportunity youth. They consciously adopt an asset-based approach, looking for and noting what is going in the right direction, what a youth has done that seems solid and positive, rather than calling out mistakes. In interviews, reengaged youth speak with appreciation of that approach, and how different it felt from their regular high school.

## Reengagement

Various models of reengagement have been evolving over the past decade where school districts and community organizations collaborate to find opportunity youth, extend a hand, and encourage them to move back on track. Local companies want trained, capable workers; local governments want informed, involved citizens. Communities and parents want well-being for children. Financial reasons to act are clear: community costs of unemployed youth without a high school credential are far greater than early investment to get youth back on track.<sup>7</sup>

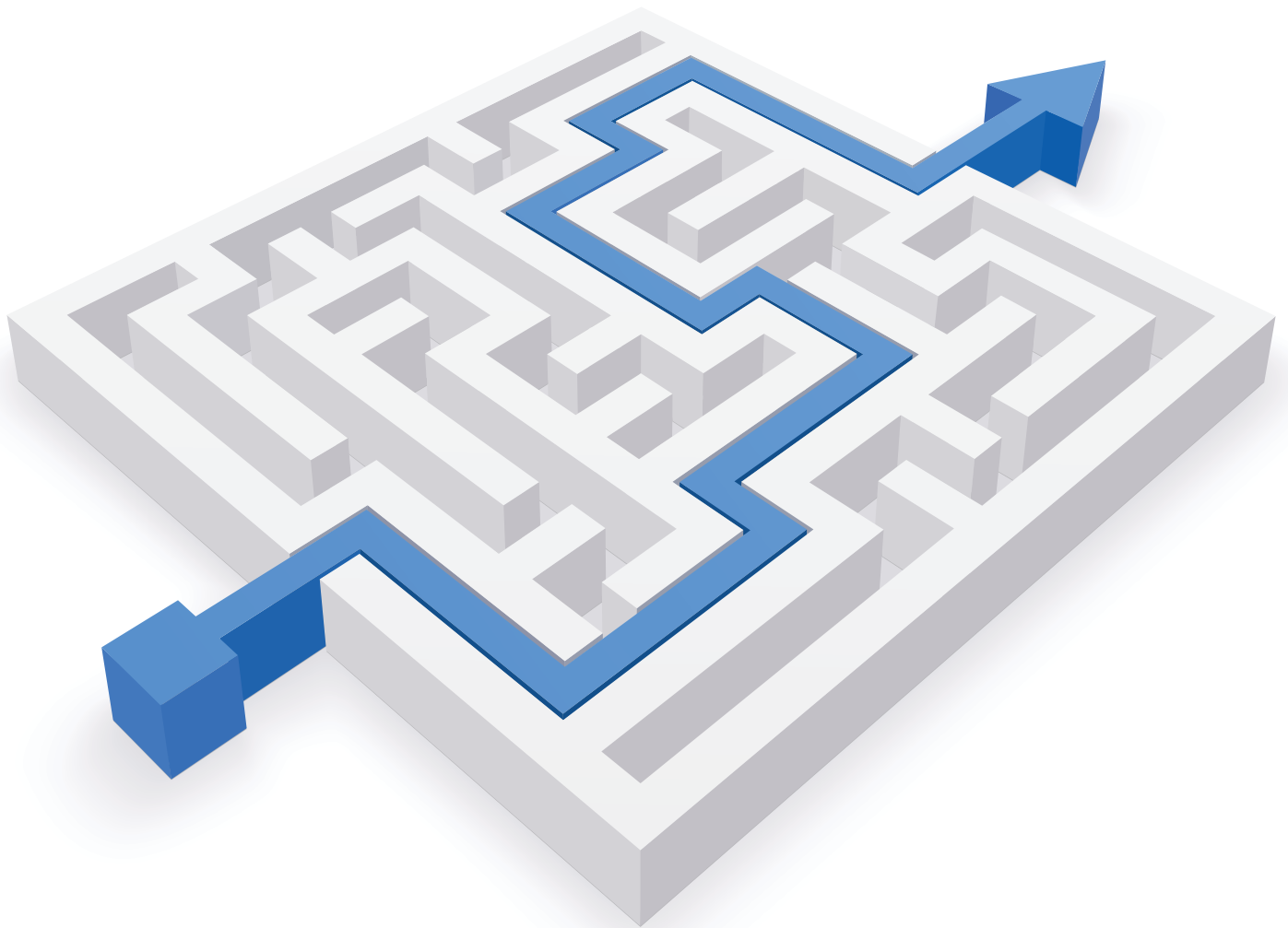
Communities, parents, students, education institutions and community organizations all want to support young people. But figuring out how to all work together to reengage youth has proven difficult in many communities.

"I went to five high schools and 2 GED programs. Now I'm an outreach worker and I understand what these students are going through. I enjoy being able to explain all of the options to a student so they can make an informed decision about what is best for them."

– Reengagement Center Outreach Specialist

## *Chapter 2*

# Challenges to Collaboration



“Outreach keeps us all honest. Through those students you will learn how the system needs to change.”

– Outreach Specialist

If school districts alone could meet the needs of all students and ensure an on-time graduation for each student, they would have done it years ago. School district leaders willingly shoulder the formal responsibility for successful student high school completion. High school graduation sits front and center as a local, state, and national marker for a district’s effectiveness.

Community leaders want to be proud of their schools, highlighting school performance measures as evidence of desirable neighborhoods and economic vitality, but oftentimes they are uncertain how to influence the situation for the better. Can the district do better? What help do they need? Will that be time and money well spent?

Forging a partnership under these conditions can be fraught with misunderstandings and land mines. Some initial challenges to partnerships can include:

- Lack of common understanding of the problem
- Lack of trust among potential partners
- Perceived insularity and/or lack of transparency of school district operations
- Lack of understanding of the community’s concerns and interests
- Incomplete solutions crafted by one party

Effective reengagement requires building a second chance system that connects schooling options with a variety of supports, knitting together systems and funding streams. To do so involves creativity, authenticity, persistence and courage among all parties. Importantly, they need to understand one another’s lived realities on the issue, along with what they can and cannot do easily, legally or financially.

## Community Partners’ Perspectives

Outreach staff recounted conversations with parents

of students disconnected from school who know their children seem disinterested in school and but may not know what to do about it. They want their children to do well in high school, learn something valuable so that they can go to college or get a good paying job. They don’t know whom to talk with or where to go. They may not speak English fluently. They may have been made to feel embarrassed by school staff. They need a welcoming, knowledgeable ally to work with them to find a school that is a good fit for their child.

Community non-profit organizations and social service organizations eager to help can feel like they keep hitting walls. Access to data and to the students themselves can be problematic. Their willingness to share services and resources can be viewed as threatening to school staff although that is not the organizations’ intentions. They see the need and feel frustration at delays and roadblocks. They say they would like to be seen as assets and would welcome the co-creation of solutions with school partners.

Alternative school options that can exist as in-district options, out-of-district programs led by community-based non-profits, and in- or out-of-district charter schools, can all compete for students. Many note their wish to build clear, smooth processes for student referrals so that students’ needs are matched well with alternative schooling approaches and opportunities. This includes community college options as well, a system constrained by its own set of policies, regulations, data sharing requirements, and funding streams.

All potential community partners, and youth

themselves, have individual interests that must be adequately met for them to enthusiastically join in the common goal of effective reengagement.

## Districts' Perspectives

School district leaders describe an understandable dilemma they face at work. They know that all adults in their community went to some sort of schooling, and that those adults may assume they already understand how schools operate, recognize where and why a system can fail and what leaders should do differently. Consequently, when school district leaders describe the competing commitments they often face, combined with decreasing funds available to many school districts during and after the 2009 recession, they acknowledge their difficult choices are largely invisible to, or unheard by, the general public.

Other than the moral imperative to educate all students within its bounds, actual incentives to a district to reengage students who have left can be in short supply. School leaders speak about their heartfelt intentions to succeed with all students while they struggle to figure out how to find the money and staff to do so.

When school leaders face pressure from parents, civic leaders and the business community to do a better job, to decrease the social costs of youth unemployed and lacking a high school credential or industry certification, they can feel frustrated and defensive. Fingers can be pointed; blame assigned. “Why aren’t the schools doing a better job? Things seem to be getting worse and worse,” can be a frequent refrain. Yet many tools to address the causes of disengagement lie beyond the capacity of a typical school budget. Social workers can seem an extravagance, additional counselors unlikely given their already short supply and high caseloads. Oftentimes a school must depend, if available, on

outside assistance to meet the needs for housing, drug and alcohol issues, health care, food, and more to assist youth who want to get back on track. Establishing schooling options tailored to the specific and individual needs of opportunity youth can be especially difficult to fund and staff.

Further, when trying to create a reengagement system, varying federal mandates and state policies can constrain district practices and procedures. School leaders understand that communicating too many details with the public or using educational jargon can cause frustration or boredom for non-school people, and they are challenged to explain what is required and what is flexible without sounding defensive. They say they welcome partners and the co-creation of solutions; but they prefer not to be told what to do.

District leaders interviewed for this report noted five areas of particular challenge for them:

### ATTENDANCE AND FUNDING

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With state funding based on student attendance, opportunities and penalties can vary according to the criteria used. Some states utilize ADA or Average Daily Attendance which allots funds based on each day of confirmed student attendance, providing districts with a financial incentive to maintain students’ enrollment and target or adjust district resources based on the students they serve throughout the year. Other states use ADM or Average Daily Membership where attendance may be counted once or twice yearly, often in October and February, motivating districts to encourage re-enrollment prior to the count date and potentially discouraging them from addressing drops in student attendance after the regular attendance count date, since no loss of revenue would be imposed and a drop in attendance can improve conditions for teachers with overcrowded classes and/or students with difficult behavioral issues.



## **ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORKS AND METRICS:**

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Federal accountability frameworks have used 4-year and sometimes 5-year high school adjusted cohort graduation rates to establish district effectiveness. These cohort rates measure students the same, whether or not they enter 9th grade with relatively equal abilities and experience manageable external negative effects during the four years of high school. Students identified as off-track for graduation, existing at the margins of public schools where they are significantly lacking credits toward a diploma, are extremely unlikely to catch up to their peers. Even though a district takes the positive step to reengage such a student, that off-track reengagement often lowers its adjusted cohort graduation rate with varying consequences depending on state and federal policy. A lowered graduation rate can adversely affect local public opinion as well. Those districts and communities stepping forward to reengage students are actively seeking credible metrics for reengagement system accountability, exploring measures like academic growth, attendance, retention and persistence once reengaged, school climate and culture, and recidivism. For reengagement programs, these metrics seem fairer, and more directed towards program improvement goals, than 4- or 5-year cohort-based graduation rates.

## **FEDERAL MANDATES FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES:**

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The percentage of students seeking to reengage who are over-age and under-credited and who had or do have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) is high: many communities estimate 50% of their reengaging students have or had IEPs. Until a student is 18 or 21 years of age (depending on the state), a district reengaging a special education student needs to acknowledge his or her learning needs and deploy staff who can understand IEPs and deliver appropriate services. Special Education teachers need special

state certification, are in extremely short supply in some locales, and increase the costs of reengagement. Reengaging students, then, can be seen as adding additional expense for the district (vs. not attempting to reengage).

## **UNIQUE TEACHING AND COUNSELING SKILLS:**

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Staff assigned to work with reengaging students need to have sophisticated, exceptional professional skills in academics, social emotional learning, effective communication, and deeply understand and sympathize with the life experiences of youth who are reengaging. Typically, districts have not been able to incentivize staff placement at reengagement centers, and stereotypes foster the perception that unsuccessful reengaging students are served by poorly skilled staff placed in low status positions. This status perception can adversely affect working relationships between a reengagement center and a district's traditional and alternative high schools and might discourage good teachers from staffing such programs.

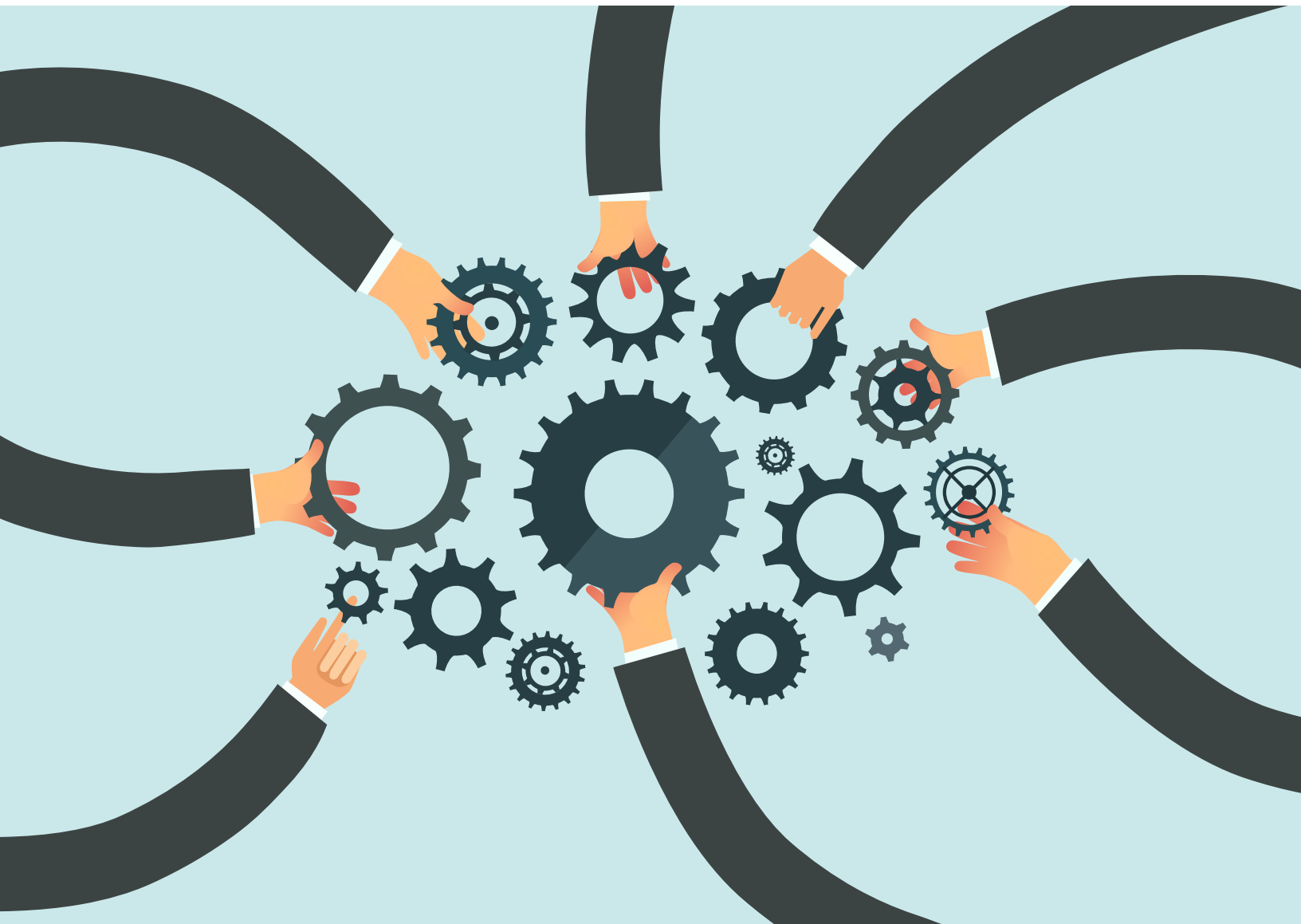
## **STUDENT NEED FOR EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS:**

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Students who have been failed by one high school may reasonably enough resist returning to the place where they will face the same conditions and encounter potential repercussions from their past. Oftentimes they need to go to school at untraditional hours, learn in different ways, work while going to school, find day care, or accelerate their progress more rapidly than typical high school courses based on seat-time credits can allow. Creating alternative educational options is expensive and time-consuming for a district. Different regulations and accountability can also come into play when a reengagement school is an official district option versus a contracted alternative run by a local non-profit organization. But districts recognize they need partners to ensure a community has multiple pathways to college and career, especially for reengaging students.

# *Chapter 3*

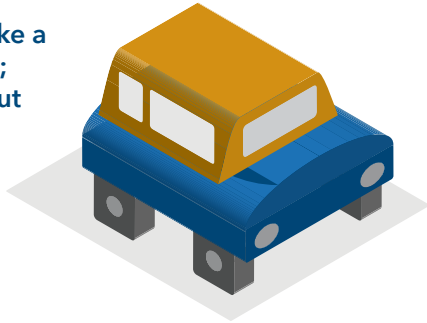
## Solutions



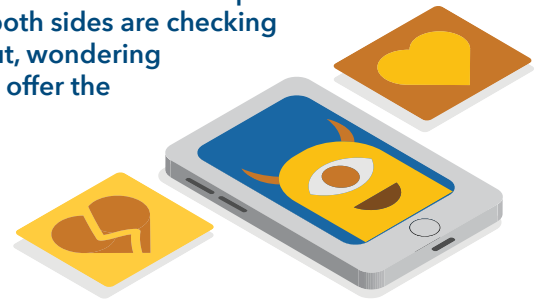
After listening to representatives from a number of Opportunity Youth Forum communities and interviewing the reengagement leaders of the four places featured in this report, a remarkable consistency emerged in their descriptions of the school district-community partnerships.

Prompted to name a metaphor for their partnerships, they suggested:

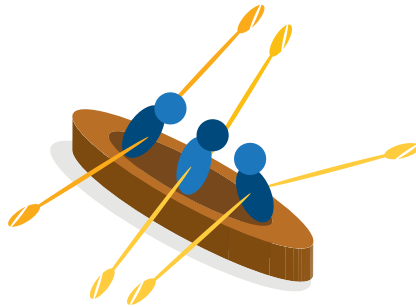
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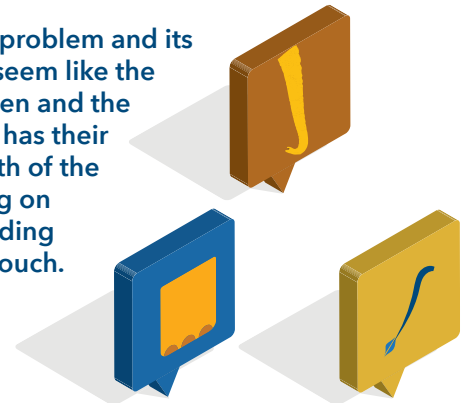
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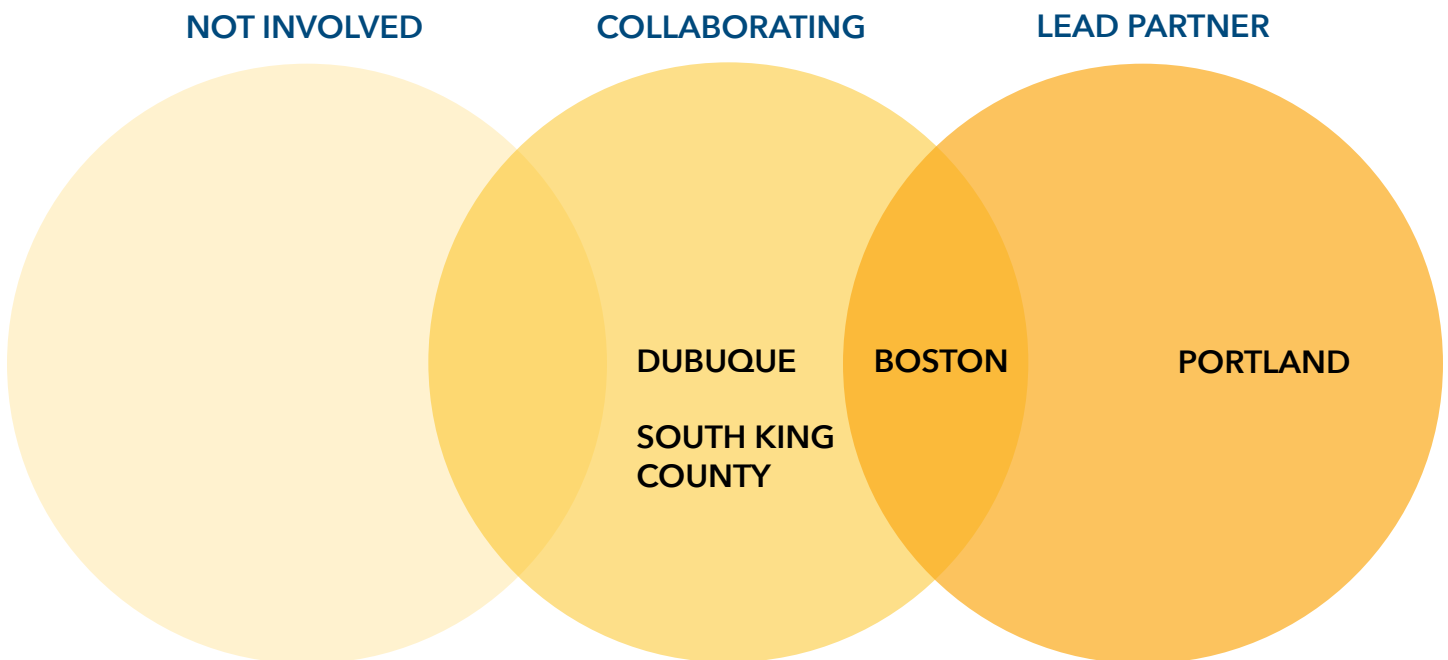


## Negotiating Differences

When discussing the partnerships, some district representatives noted the difference between contracting with community services and non-profit organizations, versus establishing a true partnership in service of a common goal. Typically districts contract for deliverables, internally managing how those results will advance progress toward the generally agreed upon goal: the contracting organization wants to deliver what is expected and be paid. These featured partnerships build more slowly with shared community and district ownership of the common identification of the problem and strategies to rectify it. All parties involved commit to more than simply meeting the deliverable expectations individually assigned to them. They are partners in a common purpose.

While some community leaders initiate reengagement efforts completely separate from the local school district, the four sites interviewed self-identify as operating between Collaborating and Lead Partner on the above Continuum of Involvement. These partnerships began between four to ten years ago and have varied in scope, funding, and other dimensions over the years. Each has a story to tell about what works, what doesn't, and more. Each has a slightly different model: each story reinforces that there is no right way to address reengagement issues because success depends on optimizing opportunities to be found in the local context, resources, and leadership.

### Continuum of School District Involvement in Reengagement Efforts



Successful school district-community collaborations often demonstrate adaptations of the seven elements of collaborative negotiations initially developed by the Harvard Negotiation Project (HNP). The HNP suggests the seven elements can all contribute to a win-win result; all are present in any negotiated venture.<sup>8</sup>

A successful school district-community partnership to reengage youth is such a venture. To create and maintain a strong, effective working partnership, the people involved enter an on-going collaborative

negotiation. The different weights the participants place upon each negotiation element serve to define and color each partnership process and outcome. The process itself is non-linear: depending on evolving opportunities and needs, one element may take center stage for a while and then move off as others simultaneously come to the fore. Underlying each of the seven elements are questions likely to be in the mind of a participating partner, a question that may be obviously on the table or only in the back of a partner's mind.

Jennifer did okay in high school, earning mostly C's. She had a small circle of friends and volunteered at the school store. During the summer between junior and senior year, Jennifer became pregnant. She was subject to snickering comments and looks from other students and started missing school to avoid the bullying. Barely passing first semester, she dropped out of high school in January needing only 4 credits to graduate. Once her baby was born and Jennifer got back on her feet, she wanted to be a role model for her daughter and find ways to earn a living. Day care costs were not affordable, but her mother and the baby's father were willing to babysit in the evenings. She found the reconnection center and planned a path to her future including immediate support services for health care and parental counseling. With on-line classes, summer school, mentoring, and added social and emotional support Jennifer earned her high school diploma while also earning community college credit and is now well on her way to a bachelor's degree in business.

## The elements and underlying questions to be answered in joint reengagement efforts are:

- ▶ **Alternatives:** What will we have if we walk away and stop being a partner? Is the status quo on reengagement OK?
- ▶ **Interests:** What does our organization really want and why is that important to us? What do the other partners want and why are they involved? Can we put our real individual interests on the table? Is there a common interest we all buy into? Have changes in local, state, or federal regulations and/or political or economic shifts affected how we need to prioritize our interests?
- ▶ **Options:** In what ways can we create new reengagement solutions that meet our own needs as well as the collective goal? Is there an opportunity we need to go after that wasn't part of our original plan?
- ▶ **Legitimacy:** How will we know our plan is fair and sustainable for all partners? How will we track partner contributions and acknowledge them? How will we measure our collective reengagement successes and progress?
- ▶ **Communication:** Are we listening as well as talking? Do we feel heard and understood?
- ▶ **Relationship:** In what ways is this a positive working relationship or not? Do we want to keep working together? Do we trust each other?
- ▶ **Commitments:** Have we created a plan to reengage our community's youth that we will stick to? Will we all keep our promises?

As leaders from the four communities described the arcs of their district-community partnerships, they often noted attention to these elements, although they did not always use the same terms to explain what they did and how they did it. Their track records of results over time, sustaining their partnerships through ups and downs while they increased local student reengagement and decreased the number of students dropping out, offer others some potentially positive courses of action to emulate or modify.

## Four School-Community Partnerships to Reengage Youth



<http://www.pps.k12.or.us/departments/education-options>

### District Leads with Reconnection Center and Recruits New Partners

Concerned about its sobering 2007-08 dropout data, Portland Public Schools (PPS) found available space for a Reconnection Center at its centrally located, career technology-focused high school. A superintendent with alternative school leadership experience worked with the director of the Educational Options department to get donations from community organizations to cover start-up costs. From the outset, leaders carefully quantified recovered state funds from reengaging students, identifying more than enough money to support outreach staff and justify an on-going line item in the district's general fund. PPS began its outreach to disengaged youth, adding staff, providing assessment services, and setting up systems to match a student to a new best-fit school. Drawing on existing relationships with youth employment organizations, the Workforce Development Board and Worksystems, Inc. became go-to collaborators. Subsequently PPS has enlisted the aid of community non-profits and social service providers as students' needs emerged, originally deepening existing relationships and recently through more intentional partnership development.

## Collaborative elements

- ▶ District's consistent internal efforts to clarify and communicate interests related to the scope of the problem and the need to reengage youth.
- ▶ Use of data to establish legitimacy of problem and progress.
- ▶ Respect for and attention to relationships between comprehensive high schools, district options, and community-based alternatives subsequently extended to workforce partners and now more slowly to other business, civic, and social service partners.

## Key Features

- ▶ District ownership of out-of-school youth problem and the need to lead to a solution.
- ▶ Superintendent sponsorship and strong support sustained over three leadership changes.
- ▶ Partnership with Worksystems, Inc. to strengthen career technical education pathways and college collaborations.
- ▶ Regular interactions between reengagement and multiple pathways staff and comprehensive high school staff at multiple organizational levels from central office to direct service employees.
- ▶ New focus to enhance teacher skills at alternative schools through long term professional development (federally funded grant), especially skills in creating and assessing competency-based instruction and project-based learning.
- ▶ Partnership with Gateway to College national office and Portland Community College programs.
- ▶ Sustained focus on racial equity and establishment of culturally relevant school environments.





<https://www.bostonpic.org/programs-initiatives/disconnected-youth/re-engagement-center>

## District joins with Local Workforce Board

The Boston Public Schools (BPS) and the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) co-founded the Re-Engagement Center, building on relationships initially developed through participation in the Youth Transitions Task Force including a range of public and nonprofit partners. The BPS and the PIC have maintained a balanced partnership over the past ten years, sharing resources, meeting facilitation across organizational levels, research, data, and more, still within the larger context of the Task Force and a larger collective impact movement. When one partner felt constrained, the other stepped up. A natural partner in reengagement, the PIC is the city's Workforce Development Board and maintains a federally mandated focus on out-of-school youth. Strong support from the mayor, the BPS Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent, and PIC Executive Director affirmed the work. The Re-Engagement Center operations have been sustained through district leadership changes and budget shortages for several reasons. The cross-sector coalition elevated the visibility of the dropout crisis across several administrations. The partnership's direct outreach to disengaged students and ability to place them back into district schools on a regular basis, combined with its strategic use of data allowed the Center to continuously demonstrate the value added by the initiative.

## Collaborative elements

- ▶ The BPS and the PIC's individual and shared interests are kept at the forefront, with students' interest as the highest shared priority.
- ▶ The partners developed and maintained genuine relationships with integrity.
- ▶ Use of data established the urgency and scope of the disconnected youth problem; re-engagement center data records confirmed benefits to youth, the district and commitment to accountability and progress to date.
- ▶ The stage is set to consider enhancing and expanding the portfolio of options.
- ▶ Communication is authentic with regular opportunities for focused conversations with youth, district staff, families, and community partners.

## Key Elements

- ▶ Use of student segmentation analysis by the Parthenon Group powerfully defines and drives the reengagement initiative.
- ▶ Data sharing agreements between district and PIC including willingness to share lists with names of disengaged students aid timely outreach. This Memo of Understanding proved increasingly important as district leadership changed.
- ▶ Early agreement between district and reengagement center allows students to choose where to return to high school rather than sending them back to the place that previously failed them.
- ▶ Location on high school campus, readily accessible to students and their families, is cost effective and legitimizes reengagement center to the public.
- ▶ Amplification of youth voice through formal and informal means. Staff listen carefully to youth, let them know their opinions can shape practices, and include youth in partnership conversations where possible. The BPS and the PIC also coordinate with the Youth Voice Project, a community-based initiative supporting development of advocacy skills and encouraging intergenerational conversations.



<http://www.dubuque.k12.ia.us/re-engage/index.html>

## District, Community College, and Community Non-Profit Co-create Plan

Re-Engage Dubuque was envisioned and implemented through Project HOPE (Helping Our People Excel) as a partnership between the Dubuque Community School District (DCSD), Northeast Iowa Community College (NICC), and the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque. Three organizational champions initially energized the initiative, communicated well and valued their deepening relationships. The partners laid out clear goals to establish a reengagement center for youth aged 16-21 who had dropped out of DCSD, reengage 25% of these youth each year, and develop an individualized plan for each reengaged student. They specified action steps, measurement of results, processes for data collection, areas of individual partner responsibility and timelines. Early planning paid off: Re-Engage Dubuque stayed on target and continues to deliver results.

### Collaborative elements

- ▶ Authentic relationships among three key partners sustained.
- ▶ Communication is frequent at multiple levels of the organizations.
- ▶ On-going data use defined the problem and adds a level of legitimacy to reports of progress to community.
- ▶ Initial planning incorporated partner interests and set the stage for on-going attention to individual and collective interests and needs.

## Key Features

- ▶ Partners keep their common goals in sight and stay student focused.
- ▶ Reengagement Coaches tirelessly reach out, building non-judgmental and encouraging relationships with youth. They also regularly interact with high school staff (front desk, counselors, assistant principals, security, principals, and teachers) having established trust over the first two years by acting as allies and not blaming school staff for student disconnection.
- ▶ Actual reengagement center co-located with NICC center in a main street storefront within a ten-block radius of most local social service providers, easing connections to other community services, and immediately connects reengaging students to positive, welcoming education environment and college student peers.
- ▶ NICC partnership allows reengaging students to work on either High School Equivalency Diploma or High School Diploma at the center. District data summary 2015-17: 316 disengaged students contacted, 198 earned High School Diploma, 85 earned High School Equivalency Diploma, 33 disengaged.
- ▶ Workforce connections allow reengaging students to also work toward short term certificate training programs or apprenticeships. NICC offers free 3-credit class for those who graduate through the reengagement center.
- ▶ NICC funds partial Reengagement Coach salary and contributes space, computers and supplies
- ▶ District Superintendent and NICC President visibly sponsor the reengagement center. District Director of Student Services and Special Education and NICC Center Director lead the work on the ground and maintain connections to the Community Foundation.
- ▶ Community Foundation convenes monthly meetings of partners at multiple organizational levels and communicates results to community leaders: Project HOPE steering committee draws leaders and Partnership Empowerment Network brings together those working directly with youth to share ideas and needs.

## A Regional Effort among Seven School Districts

The Community Center for Education Results (CCER) staffs the Road Map Project, a collective impact initiative to improve education results in South Seattle and South King County WA from cradle to college and career. Its core commitment to closing achievement gaps for low-income students and children of color serves as a touchstone for all of its projects. CCER convened the collaborative partners who developed a shared vision and set ambitious initial goals for reengagement and attainment of a high school credential. Through the Road Map Project and CCER's efforts, especially via the Opportunity Youth Work Group, partners discuss and assess strategies to provide reengagement services among school districts, community colleges, community-based organizations, workforce providers, and county government. Washington State's Open Doors policy, overseen by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, directs funds to reengagement programming.<sup>9</sup> CCER assists partners as they determine ways to obtain and maximize the use of Open Doors and other funds for resource deployment, data and accountability measures, and program improvement. CCER staff, in partnership with King County government, convene program providers and regional leaders at regular intervals to support a rich, on-going exchange of ideas and concerns.



<https://roadmapproject.org/focus-areas/opportunity-youth/>

## Collaborative elements

- ▶ Relationships are valued at multiple organizational levels and across the region.
- ▶ Communication is fostered across districts and with community partners.
- ▶ Convening by an intermediary organization facilitates surfacing of individual organizational interests and affirmation of collective interests.
- ▶ Gentle pressure and support among the regional partners reinforce the use of data to establish the legitimacy of efforts and results, while the state Open Doors policy adds opportunity and accountability.

## Key Features

- ▶ Collective impact initiative bringing together seven school districts in a regional effort that offers both pressure and support to leaders seeking to minimize student disconnection and increase reengagement.
- ▶ CCER's coordination of the initiative across multiple districts requires sophisticated, adept, responsive facilitation that is non-linear and opportunistic. Needs and resources can change in unanticipated ways and coalition members and facilitators need to be able to recognize the moment and seize it.
- ▶ Adoption of the Jobs for the Future Back on Track model for the region affords a shared approach among members of the collaboration.<sup>10</sup>
- ▶ Convening people at different organizational levels supports necessary strategic conversations among leaders and promising practice sharing among direct service providers.
- ▶ A range of interest and ability to initiate reengagement work across the seven districts presents both challenges and opportunities for the collaborative effort.
- ▶ The state level reengagement (Open Doors) policy implementation provides a national exemplar.
- ▶ The extension of partnership involvement to city and county government officials holds promise.

Faith did not connect with high school. Artistic, creative, and sensitive, Faith felt bored in classes and did not understand why school mattered; soon Faith disconnected from school. With too many absences to earn credits, Faith hid on the margins of her high school assuming no one noticed her. A counselor recognized the problem and the opportunity to help Faith get on track, introducing her to the reconnection center and collaborating with the staff there to find a school option that was a better fit. Today Faith thrives at an arts magnet school where she “learns by doing” and can apply what she learns in real world internships.

## Themes Across All Communities

Commonalities emerged across the four communities featured in this report. Challenges faced are similar; effective responses vary somewhat depending on the opportunities available around access to district resources, different strengths and assets partners bring to the table, organizational leadership stability, and advantages created through new state policies. The themes described here reflect places where partners noted how they are moving ahead collaboratively to modify established practices and ways of working that potentially set the stage for future policy shifts.

### DEFINE THE PROBLEM WELL.

When a community knows the dimensions and characteristics of the problem to be solved, it plans more strategically and allocates resources more effectively. Boston (2007 and 2018) and Portland (2013) conducted segmentation analyses of their districts’ high school students to better quantify who graduated, who didn’t, what pathways led to success, and where gaps occurred. Boston obtained grants first from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and then from the Barr Foundation to fund its studies, and Portland used a blend of in-house Research and Evaluation Department resources and an external entity for data analysis and synthesis. South King

County is currently exploring how to conduct and fund a regional analysis. Since Dubuque’s number of high schools and alternatives is much smaller, it is able to track these graduation and dropout data points less formally.

A segmentation analysis determines who is on-track or off-track to high school graduation. Of particular interest is the analysis of dropout data: Who disengaged from school? How old were they? How many credits did they have toward a diploma? What was their grade level? Four categories delineate those off-track: Young and Close, Young and Far, Old and Close, and Old and Far. Although the exact definitions of each category vary according to how a district determines who is “on-track” (e.g., the number of credits required for a diploma and the age range of students the district can legally serve), the number of students identified in each category help a district and its community understand what sorts of educational options and services are needed to reengage youth.

Boston’s first analysis legitimized its reengagement center efforts and placed a laser-like focus on its dropout problem. The BPS graduation rate has increased from 57.9% in 2007 to 72.7% in 2017. However, there are still 20% of students who are off-track in high school, and of those off-track students 90% are Black or Hispanic. Reengagement efforts are consistently drawing youth back to the system.

“Notice the small wins. Strive for success of the possible and tolerate the risk of possible failure along the way.”

– District Reengagement Director and Executive Director of Non-Profit in unison

Because these youth are mostly off-track students, their increased presence on the rolls can mask the appearance of progress in overall percentage of off-track youth, in attendance rates and in graduation rates. The Boston PIC, with BPS agreement, provided important feedback to the segmentation study team to enhance understanding of reengagement data and the role of the reengagement center, what it can and cannot do. The 2018 analysis has given reinvigorated focus to the community’s disconnection problem and its need to tailor responses to meet youth where they are on their path back on track.

#### **MATCH STUDENT NEEDS WITH A PATHWAY TO FUTURE SCHOOL AND WORK SUCCESS.**

A “best fit” approach matching students’ needs with school strengths, culture, and opportunities increases the likelihood of sustained reengagement. All four cities recognize that their educational options could align more accurately with students’ ages, credit accumulation toward a high school diploma or progress toward a high school credential, interest in career pathways, and school culture. Additionally, some students need schools that offer credit through proficiency assessment, ways to accelerate progress beyond seat-time credit accumulation via on-line courses and other methods, alternative days and times to attend school, and flexible processes that do not penalize youth who must balance significant daily living challenges like accessing housing, food, and health care.

Portland has decreased its number of alternative schools over the past decade, increasing the rigor and results at the most promising sites and striving to create an array of multiple pathway options. Highline School District in South King County operates several options accessible to students from other districts in the collaborative. It is studying how to strengthen and focus its options to ensure students have exactly what

meets their needs and every option delivers excellent outcomes.

Strategic involvement of community partners (social service providers, non-profit organizations, business, and civic leaders) to support students on multiple pathways can enrich the portfolio of available options. District and community leaders interviewed agreed that when students fail academically at a local high school or need another placement for social-emotional reasons and have limited school choices, they reengage more reluctantly and are less likely to persist. A district’s ability to establish and sustain educational options can be limited: once a school option is created, the ramifications of continued funding and staffing as well as its impact on school district data can become problematic. All four cities to varying degrees of complexity use a combination of district created reengagement options and others run by community non-profits and/or community colleges to complement their traditional high schools – and all four wish they had more options of all kinds.

#### **DISTRICT AND COMMUNITY REENGAGEMENT PARTNERSHIPS SEEK ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORKS THAT ACCURATELY REFLECT THE SCOPE AND DETAILS OF THE PROBLEMS TO BE ADDRESSED AND WHAT IT REALLY TAKES TO SUCCESSFULLY GET YOUTH BACK ON TRACK.**

Nationally many state accountability systems present disincentives to school districts for re-enrolling out-of-school youth beyond the 4- and 5- year graduation window. The National League of Cities Reengagement Network has facilitated discussions



about reengagement accountability frameworks and encouraged cities to test them out in systematic ways. All four cities track their reengagement data; they want to know who they are serving, what their needs are, how effectively the reengagement process itself is operating, and how students are doing, once re-enrolled, on some type of college and career path. Some of the metrics being tested include:

- academic progress (testing skill growth in reading and math, credit attainment);
- persistence of reengagement and /or school connection (“stick rate” or number of times youth attempt reengagement before truly committing to a program);
- attendance (daily or hourly) at a reengagement center or new school;
- successful completion (earning a high school diploma or other credential, earning an industry certification, earning college credit);
- school climate and culture (surveys to understand student and staff and family perceptions of social-emotional supports, academic rigor, equity of treatment and opportunity, cultural relevance); and
- future success at the next level – postsecondary or career technical education.

District-community reengagement partnerships recognize that the typical and often evolving metrics used by states and the federal government to assess school and district performance cannot be automatically applied to reengagement initiatives because they do not reveal the true story of an initiative’s challenges, efforts, and successes.

#### **RECOGNIZE THE NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR STAFF WHO DIRECTLY REENGAGE YOUTH.**

Teachers and other staff at reengagement centers and schools receiving newly reengaged students need focused professional development over time to

increase their skills in the sophisticated instruction required, especially if instruction is competency- or performance-based. Districts successfully reengaging youth are prioritizing funds for this need. If a district uses on-line coursework options, then the staff involved need excellent skills at personalized student guidance including tutoring, problem solving, technical savvy, and feedback that builds students’ self-assurance. These schools can’t do their work without staff skilled at supporting social-emotional learning, and without helping youth to develop social-emotional skills and awareness. This is done by creating authentic relationships with students, which can lead to helping youth make wiser decisions in their own best interest, learning self-management skills, and more. Staff at alternative schools need additional background at competency- and project-based learning frameworks, career pathways expansion, case management and social-emotional support for students.

Portland is one of only sixteen communities to receive an early phase federal Education, Innovation and Research (EIR) grant, and the only one concentrated on alternative education, for its proposal for PREP: Personalized, Relevant, Engaged for Postsecondary. The five-year, \$3.9 million grant addresses professional development needs at the district’s alternative schools where many reengaged students enroll. Federal Way School District in South King County designates one day per week for staff development at its alternative high school, managed by allowing students to work on-line while staff collaborate.

#### **AN ANALYSIS OF WASHINGTON STATE’S OPEN DOORS POLICY CAN INFORM OTHER STATES SEEKING TO INCENTIVIZE COMMUNITY EFFORTS TO REENGAGE YOUTH.**

The Washington state legislature passed HB 1418, now known as Open Doors, in 2010.<sup>11</sup> A first in the nation state-wide model, it demonstrates the state’s commitment to closing the gap for opportunity youth.

The legislature and state education department have subsequently added rules and regulations to support its implementation. Designed to encourage school-community partnerships to reengage youth, it has sparked a wide variety of reengagement program types, and the state education department staff responsible for its implementation actively supports districts as they implement it. Framework elements include: a statewide framework of reengagement, encouragement of partnerships and collaboration, state K-12 basic education allocation funding that follows the student to age 21, performance-based and individualized instructional models with multiple indicators of academic progress, designed to be an on-ramp to college and career pathways, and a requirement for case management. A coalition of Portland reengagement partners has studied Washington's experience and is now consulting with Oregon state legislators who are potentially interested in learning from Washington's first-in-nation attempt to build such a system and improving upon some of its known shortcomings.

**DISPROPORTIONATE NUMBERS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS AND YOUTH WHO QUALIFY FOR LEARNING DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES PARTICIPATE IN REENGAGEMENT, AND DISTRICTS STRUGGLE TO PROVIDE REQUIRED SERVICES.**

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If a student has or had an Individual Education Plan (IEP), then the district must offer services provided by qualified, certified staff. This can increase reengagement center and alternative school staff costs. All four partnerships report high percentages of special education students. In some cases, they also note that frequently special education students self-identify as low-income and members of racial and ethnic minorities as well as being disproportionately male and having had experiences in the juvenile justice system.

Portland found that the percentage of over-age and

under-credited students coming to the reengagement center with IEPs initially hovered around 50%. The Center needed to acknowledge these students' learning needs and have staff that could understand and adapt instruction to IEPs, posing a critical issue for program design. Early on PPS had the Director of Special Education attend weekly reengagement center meetings to review student files and subsequently they were able to hire some special education certified reengagement center staff. Central office support from the Director of Student Services helped staff dissect special education laws to determine how to deliver and fund required resources.

**WHEN FUNDING STRANDS CAN BE BRAIDED TOGETHER, THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS.**

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State and federal funds administered through different departments come with different eligibility and use regulations, but they also can present innovative alternatives for collective action. Districts can most easily increase state funds they receive according to the state's per student formula by reengaging youth. With these state funds come many regulations as to how money can be spent. Schools generally have less flexibility to support innovations outside the boundaries of normal operating procedures than an out-of-district alternative school or program might have through the sponsorship of a community non-profit organization. Limits on teacher schedules and working conditions, school hours of operation, or specifically which students can receive benefits from which funds are examples of what can present barriers to districts that want to open a reengagement center or new alternative school tailored to student needs for flexibility. State policy like Open Doors in Washington State clearly incentivizes district reengagement initiatives.

Dubuque uses state funds specifically designated to provide additional support to identified at-risk students who may be homeless, out-of-school or on

“You have to be opportunistic at all times. This is not linear work. Look for opportunities at multiple organizational levels.”

– Non-profit organizational partner

the verge of dropping out. These supplemental funds based on a weighted formula can be used to develop and maintain its reengagement programs. Workforce boards who partner with districts bring WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) dollars to the table. Both Portland through its Worksystems, Inc. partnership and Boston through its PIC partnership have shown how workforce and education funds can be blended in smart ways to leverage reengagement initiatives. Pell Grants through the US Department of Education offer college tuition support for low-income students. These funds combined with other community college resources can also expand student options and supports: Portland Community College, especially its Gateway to College Program, and Northeast Iowa Community College exemplify this approach as do other examples in Boston and King County. The contributions of community non-profits with freedom to flex and innovate as needed can be an invaluable addition to the mix. Where others are constrained, non-profits can co-create solutions more rapidly than government institutions. Finally, philanthropy can add a critical piece to the pie, especially if funding a specific project designated as a need by the partners, like the Boston funding obtained for the segmentation analyses, or if the donation is unrestricted support of the collaborative’s goals.

**BY ANALYZING STUDENTS’ HISTORIES OF DISCONNECTION AND REENGAGEMENT AND BY LISTENING TO YOUTH THEMSELVES, CRITICAL INFORMATION CAN BE GLEANED TO INFORM SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT.**

The youth who work their way back on track via a reengagement center can provide rich, valuable information. Whatever happened to pull them away

from school – academic problems, school culture, or non-school related social, emotional, economic or physical needs – can help to inform a communities’ collaborative response to serve youth better.

Districts have created forums for dialogue among traditional high school staff, reengagement staff, community members, and service providers to increase understanding of students’ negative perceptions of school as well as what changes they recommend that would improve student success rates and overall experiences. South King County youth spoke at a recent Opportunity Youth Forum convening, affirming their belief that “if adults study data about us, they need to do it with us.”

## **Advice from School Leaders on Partnering with Districts**

**DISTRICT LEADERS EMPHASIZE THE NEED TO COMMUNICATE HONESTLY ABOUT THEIR NEEDS, INTERESTS, AND AVAILABLE RESOURCES TO CONTRIBUTE TO COLLECTIVE ACTION, AND THEY WELCOME HELP WITH COMMUNITY PUBLIC RELATIONS TO SPREAD THE WORD.**

When school district staff move to more actively support the reengagement of their students, leaders described their need to operate strategically, considering both internal and external audiences. Some essential actions named by central office leaders include taking care to:

- Delineate the problem to be solved with credible data.
- Listen to district staff, community leaders, families, and the students themselves.
- Manage the visibility of the problem by setting realistic expectations, sharing credit for progress, stepping up to own district responsibilities for the situation, and resisting any unfounded blame directed to students or staff or the system.

- Regularly share data indicating progress and problems along with success stories that humanize dropout and reengagement data – like stories of students earning a high school diploma and community college credit simultaneously with data on “old and far” students reengaged; or stories of students finally deciding to reengage on their third try due to the persistence of an outreach coordinator who helped find a resource for needed day care, coupled with reengagement center data on number of students contacted and “stick rate.”
- Boston and Portland welcomed local media to learn about reengagement. Early on Boston’s reengagement center opened its doors to Boston Globe reporters who learned about why students opt out of high school and what it takes to reengage students. The front-page story painted a compelling picture of possibilities, communicating a message of a BPS-PIC partnership making a difference. Positive press contributed to community energy to continue the work at a key start-up time, counteracting the stereotypical assumptions about dropout problems and district inaction. Portland made it easy for local media to connect to reengaging students and outreach workers who told stories of early discouragement and recent successes, again building momentum and general public support as the reengagement center was gaining traction.
- Both Dubuque and South King County benefit from the public relations credibility of their community non-profit partners. The Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque and the Community Center for Education Results possess multiple avenues for sharing data, exploring the dimensions of local reengagement issues, and lending credibility to important data on progress and/or emerging needs. Trustworthy third-party validation of the work and demonstrated alliances can be priceless public relations to a district and a reengagement center.

## **Districts and community partners recommend shifting processes and practices before policies.**

School leaders shared that when they want to turn around their reengagement data and create or strengthen a system to help students get back on track, they ask staff to focus on shifting practices and processes. Rather than seeking district policy changes that would officially dictate new rules, school leaders at the system and building levels strive to shift internal practices and processes as they are warranted by evidence of progress in the right direction. By doing so, they build increased system and community understanding of reengagement efforts and create local allies. They diffuse potential resistance by moving deliberately and opportunistically, showing wherever possible that reengagement can benefit a district financially and enhance its public perception as well as serve students well – all students. Resisting a zero-sum view, school leaders talk of making the pie bigger with a ‘both/and’ approach.

Community partners, especially reengagement staff, suggest it is important to know what procedures stem from an actual district policy and what is usual or unquestioned practice: some things are not rules and a simple conversation can prompt a needed change.

Over time, structures can be created to support reengagement efforts, structures that can become embedded in normal district operations or funded by portions of the general fund, often braided with other federal, state, and philanthropic funding streams. Such structural change and normalization of processes can position the district to weather leadership changes and sustain the reengagement work. For example, district administrators responsible for the high school system can make sure reengagement center leaders regularly participate in operational meetings with high school leaders, legitimizing reengagement staff

members' position within the secondary school system while also creating an on-going feedback loop for the exchange of data, stories, and lessons learned. They recognize much can be gleaned from understanding who does and does not succeed in high school or via a reconnection center; the system can make smarter improvements through this self-awareness.

### **Listen to youth. Listen to staff.**

Opportunities for youth input can be set up on a regular basis, building student comfort in speaking their truth and offering suggestions. Leaders note that youth input can persuade staff otherwise fixed in an unhelpful way of working, opening their eyes to student experiences and needs. Through student stories, staff can learn where district procedures erect unintentional roadblocks or discriminate against students through implicit bias or unequal opportunity and support. District leaders report positive collateral effects from organizing professional development experiences for high school counselors, high school administrators, and reengagement staff: trust increases, smarter referrals can be made, greater understanding develops as relationships deepen naturally through conversation and appreciation for each person's role in the system.

# Conclusion

James entered high school lagging academically behind other ninth graders, especially in math and English. His family had moved several times forcing him to enroll and re-enroll in 3 different middle schools. A natural athlete, coaches recruited him for football. But from James' point of view, they only cared about how he did on the field, not about him. Alienated and struggling in core subjects, he failed classes second semester and got off track. By age 17 James wanted to make something better of himself but didn't know where to go or how to start. After multiple tries cycling through the district's reengagement options, he began to earn credits through on-line courses, tutoring, and regular classes. Reengagement coaches connected him to a social worker, housing resources, and part-time work opportunities. By age 20 he became a father and his motivation to graduate drove him to finish at the reengagement center: he wanted "to show his daughter something good." Thanks to the reengagement center where "staff treat him like family and help him solve the problems that come up," James graduated at age 21 and is heading off to college - maybe to become a reengagement counselor.

All four communities featured in this report along with representatives of the National League of Cities Reengagement Network and the Opportunity Youth Forum expressed optimism that progress is being made across the country - fewer youth are disconnecting from school and more are being reengaged in meaningful ways. Problems are more well defined; collaborative partnerships are creating flexible and sustainable paths of support to make sure youth get back on track. Acknowledging there is always more to learn, they welcome the sharing of good ideas and the support of thought partners who can help communities work smarter.

All consulted for this report expressed their desire to simultaneously increase reengagement while also decreasing the need for it in the first place. They share Archbishop Desmond Tutu's admonition: "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in." While preventing dropouts will always be a goal of school districts, facing the reality that some youth will disengage from

school is essential. If district and community leaders, in partnership, seek to actively learn what happened and why, then systems will improve and youth will be well-served.

## Additional Reading

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# Endnotes

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- 6 America’s Promise Alliance. Retrieved August 30, 2018 from <http://gradnation.americaspromise.org/2018-building-grad-nation-report>
- 7 The National League of Cities Reengagement Network has developed a return on investment tool that can help cities weigh the costs of early intervention in reengagement versus later community costs: [https://www.nlc.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/NLC-Return-on-Reengagement-Investment-Tool\\_blank\\_May2018.xlsx](https://www.nlc.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/NLC-Return-on-Reengagement-Investment-Tool_blank_May2018.xlsx)
- 8 Fisher, Roger & Ury, William L. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Penguin: United Kingdom. 1981.
- 9 Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Retrieved September 6, 2018 from <http://www.k12.wa.us/reengagement/default.aspx>
- 10 For further background see Jobs for the Future: <https://www.jff.org/>
- 11 Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Retrieved on September 6, 2018: <http://www.k12.wa.us/Reengagement/Laws.aspx>