The DC High School Dropout Crisis

**College Success Foundation
DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation
WETA**

October 2012

**Report prepared by:
Nisha Sachdev, DrPh
Research and Evaluation Manager
DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation**

Overview of Report

Washington, DC high school graduation rates continue to lag behind other cities nationally. This report is intended to provide an overview of the dropout crisis and assist in planning for youth services to continue to increase academic outcomes. This report contains (1) a descriptive analysis of the high school graduation status in DC; (2) an overview of the resources and services in DC currently available for youth; and (3) a brief description of the resource and geographic gaps of services currently available. This assessment focuses on the goal that all youth should be provided the resources and opportunities to graduate high school. It is also available to provide useful information to community stakeholders to help deepen their knowledge and understanding of factors and consequences of dropping out and services available to help alleviate the high school graduation crisis in Washington, DC.

This study was sponsored by WETA[1] in collaboration with the College Success Foundation (CSF)[2] and the DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation (the Trust)[3] as part of the American Graduate[4] project, a national public media initiative addressing the dropout crisis around the country. The full project included compiling a list of organizations that are working effectively to address the DC dropout problem; surveying those organizations about their work and their need for volunteers; producing a searchable online database listing the organizations; describing their work; and showcasing volunteer opportunities; and preparing a "gap analysis" interpreting the survey results, showing where services are available and identify gaps in service delivery. This report focuses on the gap analysis. The other components can be found at the American Graduate DC website. Comments and questions from this report are welcome and can be directed to Nisha Sachdev, the Research and Evaluation Manager at the Trust at nsachdev@cyitc.org.

---

[1] Information for WETA can be found at: http://www.weta.org/
[2] Information for the College Success Foundation can be found at: http://www.collegesuccessfoundation.org
[3] Information for the Trust can be found at: http://www.cyitc.org
[4] Information for America Graduate DC can be found at: http://www.americangraduatedc.org/

Overview of High School Graduation in DC

High school completion has far-reaching consequences and affects individuals' life trajectories socially and economically. Individual benefits include better health and greater opportunities for the next generation. Furthermore, high school education is not only important to individuals; the societal consequences of a well-educated citizenry include increased productivity, lower crime rates, and increased community service (Sokatch, 2006).
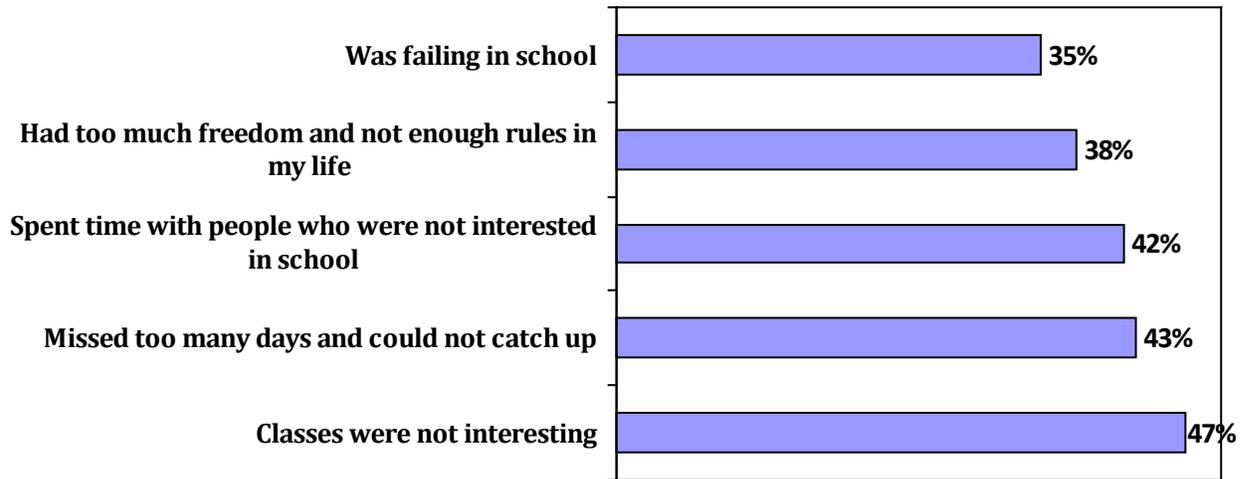
In the United States today, only 60% of low-income youth can expect to graduate from high school, one in three can expect to enroll in college, and only one in seven will earn a bachelor's degree (Kenny, Gualdron & Sparks, 2007). In Washington, DC, this statistic is even more devastating. Of every 100 students who enter 9th grade in DCPS and DC charter schools, only 43 graduate from high school within five years, 29 enroll in postsecondary educational programs within 18 months of graduating high school, and 9 attain a postsecondary degree within five years of enrolling in college (Double the Numbers, 2006). Furthermore, it is important to note the inconsistencies of high school graduation by schools and/or ward. For example, in Ward 1 the graduation rate is 68% (ranging from 40% to 100% by school) versus Ward 8 where the graduation rate is 55% (ranging from 12% to 75%).[5] Wards 7 and 8 are the poorest wards in DC with high rates of negative social indicators. It is necessary that the youth in these wards have access to quality resources and programs to help overcome these inconsistencies.

Factors Leading to Dropping Out

According to a study done by Civic Enterprises (2006), the top five factors leading to dropping out are the classes not being interesting, missing too many days to catch up, non-engaged peers, not enough life structure, and failing school (See Figure 1).

---

[5] See http://www.americangraduatedc.org/content/dc-high-school-graduation-rates-school for graduation rates by school and ward.

Figure 1. Top Five Reasons Dropouts Identify as Major Factors for Leaving School.

Reason	Percentage
Was failing in school	35%
Had too much freedom and not enough rules in my life	38%
Spent time with people who were not interested in school	42%
Missed too many days and could not catch up	43%
Classes were not interesting	47%

Source: Civic Enterprises, 2006.

Many previous studies use the National Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (NELS 2002), which was designed to monitor the transition of a nationally representative sample of students from tenth grade through high school graduation and on to postsecondary education. NELS 2002 was conducted to provide comprehensive information to students, their parents, their teachers, and their schools to estimate the effects of both student-level and school-level factors on educational success (National Education Longitudinal Study, 2002). In addition to the above, further factors and consequences of dropping out are provided through NELS 2002.

Lack of Academic Achievement and School Attendance

Unsurprisingly and consistent with the statistics above and the NELS 2002, low-income African-American youth are faced with limited resources and generally have the poorest record of student academic success. For example, a recent report indicates that schools lacking counselors, teachers with adequate training, and college preparatory curricula have a serious problem providing students with an adequate and fair level of education, which leads to frustration and ultimately students dropping out (Thomas, 2000).

In addition, achievement test scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that African-American scores fall considerably behind white and Asian-American students in reading, mathematics, and science (Rogers, Terriquez, Valladares & Oakes, 2004). These data signify inadequate college preparation and demonstrate a significant barrier to progression for students who attend these schools. The lack of achievement may lead to discouragement with the youth and therefore lack of motivation to graduate.

School environment on the whole has the potential to impact truancy or even dropout rates altogether. It was reported students who had a negative experience in the academic setting were more likely to have feelings of rejection and thus, were more likely than their counterparts to drop out of school (Becker & Bronwyn, 2002). Approximately 20% of all public school students in DC have missed 15 days of unexcused absences, with the total being 40% for 9th graders (American Graduate DC, 2012). This high rate shows that youth are not attending school consistently and could be due to the school environment as well as other family and peer factors (CYITC, 2011).

Income

Income has also been found to be closely related to graduation rates: the higher the family income of a starting student, the greater are his or her chances of graduating (Brooks-Gunn, Guo & Furstenberg, 1993). Students report that financial concerns such as having to care for a relative, having a child, or running out of money are powerful factors that can result in dropping out. The data also show that one of the reasons students leave before graduation is that they work too much while attending school which can have an effect on their grades and attendance (American Federation of Teachers, 2008).

Peer and Parental Involvement

Supportive parental involvement is believed to determine students' academic success or failure. Studies show that when parents are involved in their children's education at home, students are more motivated to do better in school (National Education Association, 2008). In addition, studies show that children who have supportive parents who understand their

educational goals are more likely to succeed in school. These patterns include parent involvement in school beginning from the time a child is in middle school, participation in parent-teacher conferences, and emotional support on behalf of the parents (Englund, Egeland & Collins, 2008).

Previous research also indicates peer acceptance is associated with how a child performs in school (Rubin, William, Bulkowski & Parker, 1998). It was found that when youth have peers with positive educational goals, they seem to emulate their peers' goals and have strong educational aspirations also (National Education Association, 2008).

Lack of Motivation and Social Issues

One of the least explored contributors to poor academic achievement and truancy is childhood emotional distress. Experts understand a correlation exists between early emotional distress and poor social and academic adjustment (McLoyd, 1998; Becker et al, 2002). Furthermore, students from the least advantaged backgrounds showed the worst outcomes, measured by reports of depression and low levels of motivation (Becker et. al, 2002). Early development of coping mechanisms for emotional distress, academically supportive peer groups, and an overall positive school environment, including investment from teachers is crucial for student achievement.

Also, the lack of use of preventive services (such as health care services) and the lack of health insurance are also factors related to educational attainment (Feinstein, Sabates, Anderson, Sohaindo & Hammond, 2006). It has been found that excessive alcohol consumption, smoking initiation and cessation, obesity, poor food-related behaviors, and low physical activity had moderate to strong relationships with low educational attainment. These risky or unhealthy behaviors lead to negative health outcomes in those with lower education attainment.

Consequences of Dropping out

Economic Consequences

The students who dropped out from the 2008 graduating class will cost DC almost $504 million in lost wages over their lifetimes (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). In addition, it leads to lost wages in the economy. A breakdown of how dropping out effects the DC economy is shown in Figure 2.

Societal/Youth Consequences

The push for education reform primarily revolves around the idea that education is directly related to earnings. In general there is a strong belief higher educational achievement is the path to better jobs and higher earnings (Card, 1998). Yet there is a barrage of research suggesting high school attainment also plays a role in health behaviors and outcomes (Ross & Mirowskym, 2011; Muening, Fiscell, Tancredi & Franks, 2010). In general those with higher

Figure 2: The Effects of Dropping Out on DC's Economy

What if half of D.C.'s 2010 dropouts graduated?

For the city's economy, it would mean ...

$12M in increased spending

$27M more in home sales

$1.5M more in city tax revenues

$17M in increased wages

Source: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006.

achievement in education tend to have better economic and health outcomes compared to those with lower educational attainment. For example, high school graduation has been linked to better health behavior such as personal control and less risky behaviors such as alcohol use and smoking during pregnancy in women (Muennig et al, 2010; Ross et al, 2011).

Low educational attainment also plays a role in developing a variety of health problems. Among those with lower educational attainment, there is a link to depression (Liem et al., 2010, Kitagawa & Hauser,1973), cardiovascular diseases (Muennig et al., 2009), morbidity, mortality, and disability (Muennig et al., 2009; Lauderdale 2001; Lynch, 2003; Schnittker, 2004; Lleras-Muney, 2005; Ross & Mirowsky, 2010). Ross and Mirowsky's work also

suggests lower educational attainment may contribute to lower physical functioning and impairment. In general the relationship between educational attainment and health outcomes improve on a gradient, but *outcomes substantially improve when at least some college education is achieved (Muennig, 2009, Liem et al., 2010, Feinstein et al., 2006).*

Summary of Services Available to Youth[6]

A majority of DC youth are eligible to enroll in the youth development programs offered by College Access Programs (CAPs), although some of the programs have special requirements such as grade level, location of school and/or residence, and career interests. An overwhelming majority of students served by the youth development non-profits in DC are from low-income, minority, single-parent households and are the first in their families to attend college. The students seek to join the programs on a voluntary basis, with some recruitment efforts from the organizations such as presentations in the school, flyers, and targeting schools. Although they have similar demographic characteristics as the general DC youth population, these students are generally more motivated, demonstrated by their willingness to attend the programs after school hours.

A survey was sent out through various listservs to collect information on the current organizations that were available to provide youth development services to the youth in DC. In addition, DC CARES provided information on applicable organizations that have registered with their volunteer database. A total of 85 organizations were included that were applicable to this project (84% from survey and 16% from DC Cares). The following section summarizes the results.

---

[6] This represents those 85 organizations that participated in the survey that was distributed.

Overview of Programs

Table 1 shows the survey responses regarding program characteristics. In should be noted that the programs had the option to select multiple choices for each characteristic (e.g., a program could provide multiple services and serve multiple age groups).

Types of Programs

Many of the programs (n=35 or 41%) had an academic component including tutoring and homework help. Furthermore, 18% (n=15) of the programs target reading and writing skills. About a quarter of them (n=22 or 26%) reported providing career exploration, which is important as it engages youth early about possible careers. Furthermore, about half (n=41 or 48%) provide college awareness and preparation activities.

In addition, to engage the students further than academics and college preparation, 38% (n=32) programs target life skills and 29% (n=25). Parent engagement is also provided by almost a quarter of the programs (n=19 or 22%) which alleviates the risk of lack of parental involvement being a factor in dropping out. Also, 35% of the programs (n=30) provided mentoring which helped provide social support to the youth. Lastly, arts, music, sports, and recreation are provided in 30% (n=26) of the programs which can provide youth development outcomes outside of the classroom.

Youth Characteristics

The programs responding to the survey provide services to youth Pre-K to college. A majority of the programs however are targeted to high school students (n=75 or 88%), with about half continuing with the students post high school. Likewise, most of the programs served 14 to 18 year olds. The number of youth served varied from larger programs to those serving fewer than 50 youth with many of them having the capability of serving more than 250 youth. It should be noted that the survey was only sent to those organizations that target middle and high school students; however some of these programs do offer supplemental services to younger youth, with many of the youth

beginning with the program at a younger age and progressing through the program through high school.

Recruitment of Youth

Recruitment methods to have youth join the programs varied by organizations. A majority of the programs recruited the youth via outreach methods such as going to the school or neighborhoods (n=53 or 62%). In addition, many of these programs also invited the youth to join the program according to eligibility (for example, low-income). Other recruitment methods included referrals from teachers or other providers and request by the youth to join the program.

Collaboration Efforts of Programs

In addition, these programs partner with intermediaries and advocacy organizations to increase support and collaboration to the services provided. About a third (n=29 or 34%) partner with DC Cares, primarily to recruit volunteers to assist youth with academic and social needs in the program. In addition, about half (n=39 or 46%) partner with the Trust to build capacity to serve the youth in the programs. This is done by receiving funding, attending trainings, and/or receiving support on increasing program quality.

Location and Operations of Programs

The programs are located and serve youth throughout the city. It was found most of the programs are open to all youth, with a focus on youth from Wards 7 and 8 (n= 63 or 74% and n=68 or 80% respectively). However, it should be noted that these two wards have the lowest number of programs that are physically located within the wards (n=3 or 4% and n=9 or 11% respectively). Wards 1 and 2 have the highest percentage of programs located in the ward (n= 22 or 26% and n=26 or 31% respectively). This shows a disconnect of where the programs are actually located and where the youth are from, which may lead to an issue of access to the programs. It should be noted that over half the programs are located within schools (n=53 or 62%) and operated year round (n=43 or 51%).

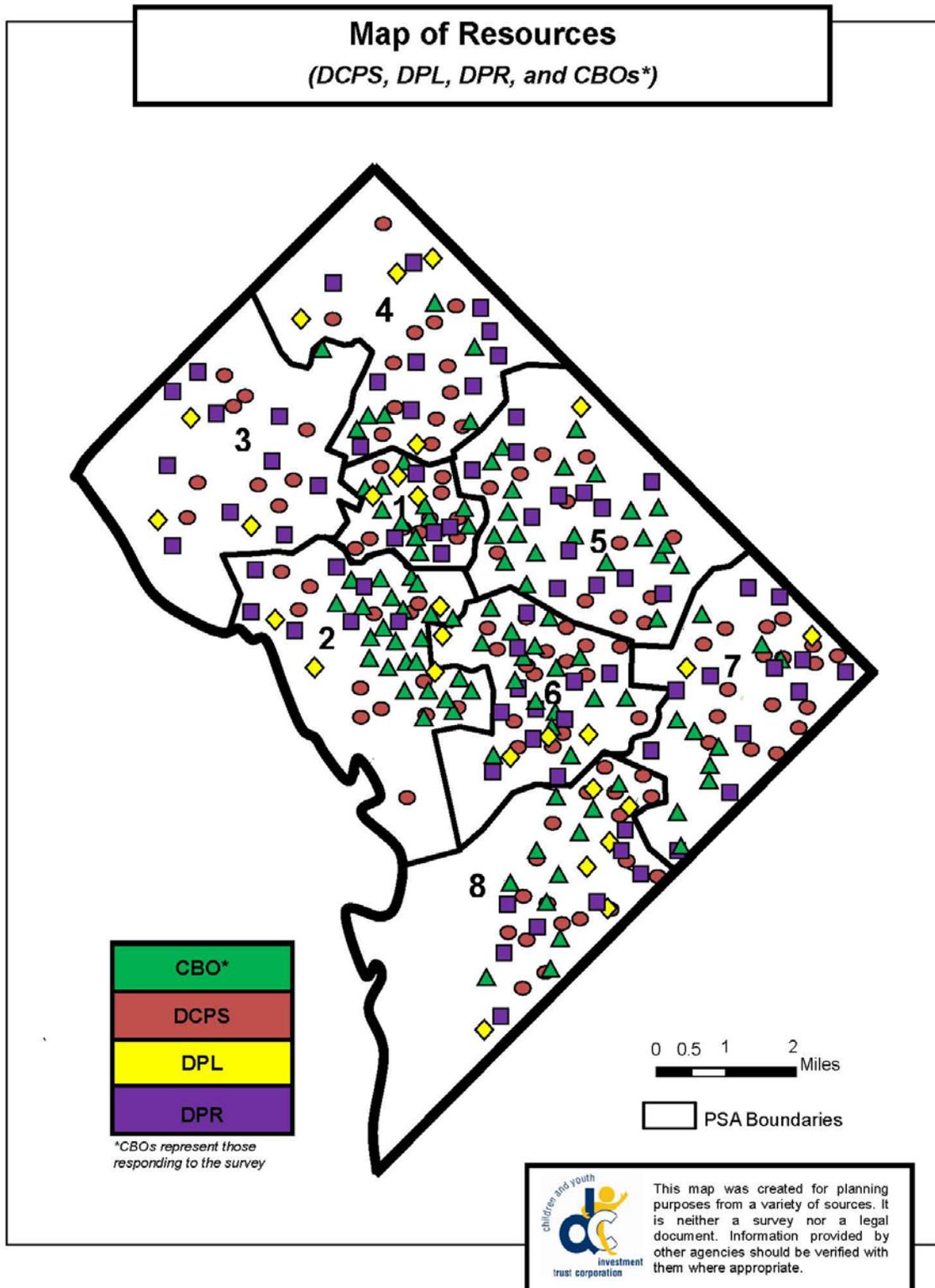**Table 1. Youth Development Program Characteristics.**

	Number	Percent
Services Provided		
Academic Skills	35	41%
Art and Music	12	14%
Career Exploration	22	26%
College Awareness and Preparation	41	48%
GED Preparation	4	5%
Life Skills	32	38%
Mentoring	30	35%
Multicultural/Multilingual	9	11%
Parent Engagement	19	22%
Reading and Writing Skills	15	18%
Service Learning/Community Service	25	29%
Sports and Recreation	14	16%
Grades Served		
6-8	61	72%
9-12	75	88%
Post 12th Grade	42	49%
Ages Served		
9-13 years	56	66%
14-16 years	72	85%
17-18 years	73	86%
Over 18 years	39	46%
Number of Youth Served		
Fewer than 50 youth	11	13%
51-75 youth	4	5%
76-100 youth	10	12%
101-250 youth	19	22%
250+ youth	35	41%
Outreach		
Invitation by Program	54	64%
Recruitment by Program	53	62%
Referral	34	40%
Request by Participant	41	48%
Partner Organization		
DC Cares	29	34%
DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation	39	46%
Double the Numbers	24	28%

Table 1. Youth Development Program Characteristics (continued).

	Number	Percent
Ward Youth Served From		
1	53	62%
2	42	49%
3	36	42%
4	51	60%
5	49	58%
6	48	56%
7	63	74%
8	68	80%
Ward Location of Program		
1	22	26%
2	26	31%
3	-	0%
4	2	2%
5	12	14%
6	11	13%
7	3	4%
8	9	11%
Months of Operation		
Academic School Year	40	47%
Summer	23	27%
Year Round	43	51%
In School		
Yes	53	62%
No	22	26%

Figure 3. Distribution of Youth Resources and Services throughout DC

Map of Resources
(DCPS, DPL, DPR, and CBOs*)

Legend:
- CBO*
- DCPS
- DPL
- DPR

*CBOs represent those responding to the survey

0 0.5 1 2 Miles

PSA Boundaries

This map was created for planning purposes from a variety of sources. It is neither a survey nor a legal document. Information provided by other agencies should be verified with them where appropriate.

Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

Before implementing or developing programs that would encourage positive behavior among DC youth and facilitate high school graduation, it was imperative to explore the specific perceptions of not just youth but various stakeholders themselves to better understand the priorities within this population. Reflections on the descriptive analysis show there is an uneven distribution of youth services and resources throughout the community, there is no central repository for data related to DC youth, and community organizations geared toward youth are often highly localized and may not have the funding or staff capability to conduct outreach or publicity outside of their immediate service areas.

CAPs and resources for youth are also unevenly distributed across DC with many of the available actual programs are concentrated in Wards 1, 5, and 6 (although a high percentage of them serve youth from Wards 7 and 8). An examination of Wards 7 and 8 revealed that these Wards fare the worst on many of the indicators, including SES. Unfortunately, they are also home to the greatest percentage of children of any of the Wards in DC. Consequently, youth in Wards 7 and 8 bear a disproportionate burden of the disparities in health, education, recreation, culture and legal services. Additional targeted approaches are needed to effectively address these disparities (CYITC, 2011).

Key recommendations to help to maximize the resources and effectively to address the drop out crisis include assessing program quality, address the diversity in participants, and collaboration. These were guided by the findings and additional discussions with youth and community based organizations.

Recommendations

Quality Programming

It is important that the youth are in quality sites and being engaged positively. Youth placements in programs should be based on specific youth needs and interests and future career goals. More program descriptions should be provided to the youth to help determine if the program is an appropriate fit. This could be done through workshops before in schools before youth engage in a program where they can learn about the goals of programs, resources available, and program expectations, rules, and responsibilities.

Supplemental Activities and Resources

It has been found that a range of services is necessary for positive youth development such as the combination of early work experience, life skills training, the inclusion of remedial education in the array of services, and mental health services (HGSE, 2011). As many of these programs are working with youth who are developing and learning skills to help navigate their transition into adulthood, program elements should be supplemented by other program activities, including career portfolio development, money management, educational exposure events, and youth leadership development. Community service should also be promoted as this can further expose youth to career interests and long-term opportunities.

Expanding Outreach to Reach "Opportunity" Youth

Although many of these programs have made progress in diversifying their participants and target youth from areas that lack resources such as Wards 7 and 8, efforts are needed to continue to recruit youth who are at higher levels of negative risk factors such as involvement in the criminal justice system and poverty. In addition, programs should continue to make a concerned effort to reach those youth who are disengaged such as youth who have dropped out of high school (referred to as Opportunity Youth). Programs could utilize their offerings to reengage the youth while assisting them with reengaging with positive opportunties. For example, selected spots in programs reserved for these youth and coupled with a GED or credit recovery programs to help reengage them. In

addition, programs should continue to partner with schools to recruit youth, however make a concerned effort to provide support to underresourced schools to make sure the youth that attend those schools are receiving information.

Collaboration with Other Agencies

There are multiple agencies in DC that provide, fund, and oversee youth education, training, and services (Ross, 2011). However, the different funding streams and performance measures often cause a lack of collaboration and ability for data sharing (Ross, 2011). By pulling in collaboration with all of these agencies, a strategic plan with regards to youth development programming can be achieved and involve not high school dropping out as a focus but other youth issues. The city has already begun to make efforts to collaborate with some of these agencies, and by continuing these efforts; the programs can leverage the resources and opportunities available. For example, working with other agencies such as OSSE can streamline recruitment and documentation that they require for programs such as the DC Tuition Assistance Grants. Programs should also reach out to local universities to provide assistance with not only the implementation of the program but also to provide resources and opportunities such as college tours and career fairs. Lastly, reaching out to local banks such as PNC and Bank of America to help youth open accounts and teach money management skills.

References

American Federation of Teachers. (2012). Student Persistence in College: More Than Counting Caps and Gowns. http://www.aft.org/. Accessed October 16, 2012.

Becker, E & Brownyn, E. (2002). Social-Emotional Factors Affecting Achievement Outcomes Among Disadvantaged Students: Closing the Achievement Gap. *Educational Psychologist, 37*(4), 197-214.

Brooks-Gunn, J., Guo, G. & Furstenberg, F. (1993). Who Drops Out of and Who Continues Beyond High School? A 20-Year Follow-Up of Black Urban Youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence. 3*(3), 271-294.

Card, D (1998). The Causal Effect of Education on Earnings, *Handbook of Labor Economics*, 67–86.

DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation. (2011). Needs and Assets Assessment of Washington, DC Youth: Executive Summary. Washington, DC: CYITC.

Double the Numbers. (2006). Double the Numbers for College Success: A Call to Action for the District of Columbia. http://www.doublethenumbersdc.org. Accessed October 14, 2012.

Englund, M., Egeland, B. & Collins, W. (2008). Exceptions to High School Dropout Predictions in a Low-Income Sample: Do Adults Make a Difference? *Journal of Social Issues,* 64, 77-93.

Feinstein, L., Sabates, R., Anderson, T., Sohaindo, A. & Hammond, C. (2006). What are the Effects of Education on Health? Measuring the Effects of Education on Education and Health and Civic Engagement: Proceedings of the Copenhagen Symposium.

Kenny, M, Gualdron, L. & Sparks, E. (2007). Urban Adolescents Constructions of Supports and Barriers to Educational and Career Attainment. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 54*(3), 336-343.

McLoyd, V. (1998). Socioeconomic Disadvantage and Child Development. *American Psychologist, 53*(2), 185-204.

Muening, P., Fiscell, K., Tancredi, D. & Franks, P. The Relative Health Burden of Selected Social and Behavioral Risk Factors in the United States: Implications for Policy. *American Journal of Public Health, 100*(9), 1758-1764.

National Education Association. Getting Involved in Your Child's Education. http://www.nea.org/parents/index.html. Accessed October 12, 2012.

Rogers, J., Terriquez, V., Valladares, S. & Oakes, J. (2004). Roadblocks to College. California Educational Opportunity Report.

Ross, C. & Mirowsky, A. (2011). The Interaction of Personal and Parental Education on Health. *Journal of Social Science & Medicine, 72,* 591-599.

Rubin, K., William, M., Bulkowski, J. & Parker, J. (1998). Peer Interactions, Relationships, and Groups. *Handbook of Child Psychology, 3,* 217-252.

Sokatch, A. (2006). Peer Influences on the College-Going Decisions of Low Socioeconomic Status Urban Youth. *Education and Urban Society, 39*(1), 128-146.

Thomas, S. (2000). The Distribution of Dropout and Turnover Rates among Urban and Suburban High Schools. *Sociology of Education*, *73*, 39-67.