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All Youth, One Set of Goals

Thoughts on a Comprehensive Federal Response to Reduce Youth Failure and Increase Youth Opportunities

Recommendations for the White House Task Force on Disadvantaged Youth

Submitted by

The Kellogg Foundation, The W.T. Grant Foundation
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The creation of the White House Task Force on Disadvantaged Youth is quite timely — the need to “develop a comprehensive federal response, under existing authorities and programs, to the problems of youth failure, with a focus on enhanced agency accountability and effectiveness” can not be overstated. Further, we can not stress enough the degree to which the opportunity to give early input is appreciated by various constituents who care about and are involved with youth.

This Task Force puts in place a vehicle and a mandate that advocates and foundations have been calling for and fully support. Being familiar with similar work at the federal level before, we realize how hard it is to get these types of memoranda passed. We also know that the hardest work is yet to come. Allow us to offer whatever supports may be of use to you as you proceed. As a starting point, we are pleased to submit our thoughts and reflections based not only upon our experience with coordination efforts at the federal level, but also upon our experience with state governments attempting similar coordination efforts for youth. As you will no doubt agree, one of the finest aspects of American government is the lessons we can learn from state innovations. In the realm of coordination on behalf of youth, there is no doubt that state governments have pushed far ahead of what we have been able to accomplish at the federal level to date.

We organized our comments based on the four established functions of the Task Force.

I. Coordinating Interagency Efforts to Address the Problems of Failure Among Disadvantaged Youth

The number one challenge youth advocates and policy makers face is that there is no clear, coherent overarching youth policy framework. As the memorandum points out, there are more than 117 Federal programs aimed at disadvantaged youth, but they do not align into an overarching policy framework. This creates challenges for both policy makers and advocates as each group grapples with the questions: 1) How do the pieces of our specific efforts connect?; 2) Do we have any blind spots?; and 3) What does all this work add up to? *This task force has the opportunity to forge an overarching youth policy framework that both policy makers and advocates could work together to advance.*

Specifically, we suggest the Task Force develop and adopt a platform that makes it clear that this country has high expectations for all of its youth and believes that youth and families a) have a right to expect government to craft policies that significantly reduce, if not eradicate, the correlations between race, class and failure; b) have a responsibility to participate fully and responsibly in school, in the workforce, in their communities and in civic life; c) have a need for public and private supports to help them address and prevent problems that can be barriers to their full participation; and d) have a desire to succeed. This platform could be used to broaden the standards mandate to include all programs and institutions that touch young people’s lives and insist that schools, child welfare agencies, juvenile justice programs, prevention programs, service programs, recreation programs, mentor programs and others are all held accountable to creating positive, structured environments for learning and development.

Recommendation #1: Allocate Reasonable Time and Energy to Developing, Vetting and Advancing a Youth Policy Framework. Councils and task forces often feel pressure to begin the work of cataloguing programs and making recommendations right away. Decisions about the framework for the report and the metrics by which programs will be categorized are often made quickly and rather haphazardly. In this case, however, a well-planned, well-vetted policy framework could be one of the lasting accomplishments of the Task Force, and merits careful attention.

Recommendation #2: Develop the Framework Based on Young People’s Needs, Not Based on Current Federal Efforts. The second pitfall that task forces often make is to start with a list of current governmental efforts, organize it into categories and use this as their framework. While this helps answer the question “how do the pieces of our specific efforts connect,” it is not sufficient to determine if there are any blind spots, or what all the work adds up to. In order to answer these questions, a youth policy framework must start with a full picture of who youth are, what they are capable of and what supports they need.

Recommendation #3: The Policy Framework Should Detail at Least Four Critical Elements. There are an infinite number of ways to divide up young people’s lives and organize them into a framework. Having viewed a large number of these frameworks from states across the country and countries across the world, we have found that the most effective ones break down an overarching youth policy framework into the following elements:

1. ***Goals: From Protection, to Problem-Reduction, to Positive Development, to Active Participation.***

We would strongly encourage the Task Force to build on the themes and challenges laid out at the National Youth Summit, which presented protection, prevention, preparation and participation not as competing agendas but as tightly linked goals. Across state and country lines, the goals that governments, programs, parents and youth all articulate are:

- *Protection* — keeping young people from harm.
- *Prevention* — preventing problems such as teen pregnancy, substance abuse and youth violence.
- *Preparation* — helping young people develop the competencies they need to succeed.
- *Participation* — encouraging young people to be active, positive participants in their community.

2. ***Outcomes: Ready for College, Ready for Work, Ready to Give, Ready to Live***

Along with the goals above, people articulating visions for (and with) young people also articulate a fairly standard set of outcomes. Across America, citizens work to ensure that young people reach young adulthood:

- Ready for college — having the basic and higher order skills, the knowledge and information needed to enter and succeed in a four-year university, and an understanding of the value of post-secondary education and the benefits of lifelong learning.
- Ready for work — having the basic skills and information needed to obtain and retain a job; and to explore and build a career that allows them to live and contribute.
- Ready to give — having the basic skills and information needed to participate in community and civic life as voters, volunteers, advocates, decision makers and leaders; and understanding that community and civic engagement are the cornerstones of American democracy.
- Ready to live — having the health and fitness habits, social and emotional skills, values and support systems needed to maintain a balanced personal life and to be in and/or create strong families and communities.

3. ***Ages: Segment and Expand the Age Range under Consideration.*** The services, supports and opportunities young people need vary greatly by age, so the policy framework must be broken down into developmental stages. Also, it is not realistic to think that every young person is a fully prepared adult by age 18. High school graduation does not mark the end of the transition to adulthood in the United States; some type of post-secondary training is necessary. Therefore, we strongly urge the

Task Force to expand the age range to 24, and to report on at least three distinct age groups: pre-adolescent (ages 6–12); adolescent (ages 13–17); and young adult (ages 18–24).

4. **Populations: Define Disadvantaged.** Not only do programs generally target specific age groups, but they also target specific populations defined by need, level of risk, status (e.g., dropout) or location. While the National Academy of Sciences reports that “[at] least 25 percent of adolescents in the United States are at serious risk of not achieving ‘productive adulthood’ and face such risks as substance abuse, adolescent pregnancy, school failure, and involvement with the juvenile justice system,”¹ some are clearly more vulnerable than others. Of 14- to 24-year-olds in 1999, 3,829,000 were out-of-school youth; 120,000 were leaving foster care; 264,000 were leaving incarceration; 604,000 were young welfare recipients; and 722,000 had incarcerated parents.² We must be clear that when we set our sights on meeting the needs of all youth, we do not leave the most vulnerable behind.

II. Developing a Unified Research Plan to Identify Effective Practices That Help Disadvantaged Youth

There are four central research challenges that we believe the Task Force is well positioned to address: 1) the research underpinning a comprehensive youth policy framework has not been summarized in one place; 2) effective practices are advanced separately in each system and sector; 3) research and accountability focuses on “black box” programs rather than practices; and 4) little research exists on how to nurture effective practices.

Recommendation #1: Commission an Independent Synthesis Report Aligned with the Policy Framework. The four critical elements of a policy framework (as specified above) break down into a number of matrices, each cell of which is backed by research — e.g., what is **known** (*research*) about increasing **participation** (*goals*) of **18- to 24-year-olds** (ages) coming out of the **foster care system** (populations) in **community service** (*outcomes*). We recommend that the Task Force commissions the National Academy of Sciences to summarize existing research for each cell of the framework (*each combination of the four critical elements of the framework*).

Recommendation #2: Identify Core Practices That Are Applicable across Sectors and Systems. Creating separate lists of effective practices for each system (effective practices for schools, effective practices for youth employment, effective practices for juvenile justice, etc.) reinforces silos and makes coordination work more difficult. The National Academy of Sciences report, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, did a great service to the field when it created a list of features of positive developmental settings that are equally relevant to families, schools and community organizations. The Task Force is well positioned to reinforce and deepen this innovative cross-system thinking.

Recommendation #3: Focus on Practices, Not Programs. Most research and accountability efforts currently focus on the program level — evaluators pick a firmly entrenched uniform program and measure its effects

¹ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2001). *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer A. Gootman, eds. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Available online at www.nap.edu/catalog/10022.html.

² Yohalem, N., & Pittman, K. (2001, October). *Powerful Pathways: Framing Options and Opportunities for Vulnerable Youth*. Discussion paper of the Youth Transition Funders Group. Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment. Available online at www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/respapers.htm#pathways.

without necessarily knowing what specifics about the program led to its success (or failure). Relatively little research looks inside the “black box” of programs to find out what makes one more effective than another. This has two harmful consequences. First, it forces all programs to undergo a very costly program evaluation to determine effectiveness. Since programs themselves are under-funded, requiring expensive evaluations may not be the best use of scarce resources. Second, “black box” evaluations give programs and funders little direction in how to sustain and improve their work. Again, the National Academy of Sciences report modeled a powerful new way of thinking. By documenting the specific practices within the “black box” of a program that lead to positive outcomes, programs are then able to undertake more cost-effective evaluations that establish the degree to which they are successfully implementing quality practices. Further, such evaluations clearly indicate to programs which practices need improvement in order to increase their effectiveness.

Recommendation #4: Research Capacity-Building Efforts. No one wants to be told that they are doing a poor job unless they have a clear way to improve. Researchers Jim Connell and Michelle Gambone partnered with Community Network for Youth Development in San Francisco to see if researchers could measure not only quality program practices, but also the effect capacity-building and training supports can have on a program. Indeed, they were able to show that program practices can be measured, and that even relatively light capacity-building and training supports can lead to substantial increases in program quality. Similarly, the Task Force would be well advised to research not only quality practices, but also methods of program support and improvement.

III. Incorporating Positive Youth Development Practices That Help Disadvantaged Youth

The term “youth development” is most commonly associated with program practices that encourage a strengths-based rather than deficit-based approach to working with young people. The principles of youth development, however, have implications not just for program practice, but for policy development and policy coordination as well.

Recommendation #1: Incorporate Positive Youth Development Principles into All Aspects of Federal Policies. A youth-centered approach to program development requires policies that have:

- **Flexible eligibility requirements** that do not require program providers to stigmatize youth, exclude youth who could benefit from the program but do not meet rigid income or risk requirements, or prematurely terminate youth who hit age or “dosage” ceilings but could benefit from extended support.
- **Program requirements** that a) reflect a common definition of program quality (again, there is value in having a common core of program quality standards that reach across systems and sectors in addition to ones tailored for best practice in particular fields); and b) expect and reward continuous program improvement.
- **Reporting and results requirements** that reflect cross-policy, cross-system goals and use common metrics that allow providers to demonstrate the combined impact of multiple programs and the cumulative impact of their work. For example, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is currently retooling to ask all youth employment programs for the same outcome data: Retention; literacy and numeracy gains; GED or high school diploma acquisition; and placement. As noted above, all programs — not just youth employment programs — could report against a common list of outcomes that touch on the four outcome areas. Weights could be given according to the primary focus of the program; targets could be adjusted to account for differences in the age or risk status of the participants.

- **Funding formulas** that provide multi-year grants and allow for outreach, staff training and program capacity building.
- **Delivery-system requirements** that build upon existing public and private, national, state and local delivery structures without dictating how, where and by whom the program must be delivered.
- **Coordination requirements** that focus on outcomes rather than processes and support the creation of multi-purpose collaboratives or coordinating bodies. Too often states are forced to create new coordinating councils for each new youth-focused funding stream — a state youth council for the Workforce Investment Act, a council for safe and drug free schools, a council for juvenile justice planning. The more these mandated and recommended councils could be merged into multi-issue youth councils (with sub committees), the easier it will be for state governments to coordinate effectively.
- **Participation requirements** that ensure that young people and their parents are involved in every aspect of the program from design, to implementation, to evaluation.

IV. Analyzing and Quantifying the Impact of Federal Efforts Aimed at Disadvantaged Youth

If there is one lesson that we have learned from watching coordination work at the Federal and state levels is that discussing program elimination will undercut all other efforts at coordination — there is simply no quicker way to solidify inevitable defensiveness and turf battles between departments and agencies. Indeed, we believe that each of the four established functions of the Task Force will be in severe jeopardy if participants are concerned that programs may be eliminated. There is no doubt that the current maze of Federal programs has built-in redundancies and inefficiencies. Yet, there are more constructive ways to handle the assignment of evaluating “the potential for expanding successful Federal disadvantaged youth programs through program consolidation, redirection of resources and elimination of effective program.”

Recommendation #1: Start by Mapping Federal Programs into the Overarching Policy Framework.

Programs can be fairly quickly catalogued by their major themes. The more useful exercise, however, is to unbundle programs into their component parts. The primary impetus behind a drug prevention program, for example, may be to equip teens with the information and services they need to avoid harmful substances. The program components, however, may include after-school and summer activities, tutoring, job training, career education and community-service placements. Every policy should be described and assessed against a common template in order to reinforce the overarching youth policy framework.

Recommendation #2: Conduct Goal-by-Goal Rather Than Program-by-Program Assessments.

Whether or not, given the tight schedule, it is feasible for the Task Force to review and compile almost 200 program-by-program assessments or to rank programs against a common standard, we suggest that this is not a wise primary exercise. The Task Force would provide significantly more grist for those who must implement its recommendations and, we believe, garner significantly more nongovernmental and bipartisan support if it steers away from pointing fingers at specific programs, and points instead at specific areas — outcome areas, age groups, at-risk populations, geographic locations and strategies — where the federal response could be improved.

Recommendation #3: Expand Successful Programs through Program Improvement and Alignment Rather Than Immediate Elimination. Instead of “naming names” and selecting specific federal programs that are effective or ineffective, the Task Force would be well-advised to instead come out with firm criteria

about eligibility requirements, program requirements, reporting and results, funding formulas, delivery-system requirements, coordination requirements and participation requirements as discussed above. This would create a common template through which all Federal programs could assess their own work. Further, there would be clear incentives for programs to retool (e.g., during reauthorizations) to fall in line with recognized standards of excellence.

Conclusion

As we hope we have demonstrated through these recommendations, we have every reason to believe that the potential of this Task Force is great. We also recognize that the work ahead is difficult. Having been in your shoes before, our number-one recommendation is to be strategic in finding ways to get help. Specifically, we believe that there are real opportunities to increase the Task Force's horsepower by partnering with foundations. We believe that a mutually beneficial partnership with foundations is possible if:

- **The Task Force Rises to the Challenge of Creating and Advancing an Overarching Youth Policy Platform.** For example, the Task Force could commit to preparing a “blueprint for action” that provides an across-the-board assessment of how well the current federal programs respond to defined needs; sets two-, five- and ten-year goals for shifting priorities; and spells out immediate steps that can be taken to bring the definitions of eligibility requirements, program requirements, reporting and results, funding formulas, delivery system requirements, coordination requirements and participation requirements into alignment.
- **The Task Force Learns from and Supports Similar Efforts at the State Level.** As noted above, there is much the Task Force could learn from state-level youth policy coordination efforts, many of which have been underway for years. At the same time, these state-level efforts would benefit greatly from increased support from the federal government, both in highlighting and legitimizing their efforts and in providing technical assistance and fiscal resources.
- **The Task Force Requests Assistance for Outreach and Research and Development.** Task forces often find it difficult to effectively receive, vet and synthesize feedback from organizations throughout the field. Further, they generally lack the funding to commission papers, interview experts and synthesize feedback, hear from panels of state policy makers, and conduct polls or strategic communications campaigns. Foundations would likely be interested in partnering to create structures for the Task Force to interact more directly and efficiently with organizations in the field, as well as the broader public, as long as it is seen as advancing an overarching youth policy framework, rather than a particular administration's priorities.

Once again, we applaud your efforts on behalf on young people, and stand ready to assist in whatever ways may be useful.