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# Alternative Pathways Project

A Framework for Dropout Reduction and Recovery

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Prepared by

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## Introduction

Educators throughout the US are creating an exciting new generation of high schools designed to address individual needs of students. Yet, while many of these schools are showing great promise, overall, national trends are still troubling. In many states, dropout rates are not declining, and more students than ever are completing school by obtaining a GED.

In response to this challenge, the Alternative Pathways Project (APP) was launched in early 2005 as part of an effort by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to increase graduation rates of minority and low-income students and ensure that all students are college-ready. The project, which builds upon prior investments into the Alternative High School Initiative to expand the range of model schools for vulnerable youth, began by outlining critical elements for school districts developing educational pathways for struggling students and those who have dropped out of school. The model that emerged was then refined through field investigations of dropout reduction and recovery efforts in six cities across the nation: Boston, Chicago, Houston, New York, Portland (Oregon), and Sacramento.

***The APP Framework highlights policies and practices that push children out of school, suggests strategies for overcoming barriers to re-enrolling in school, and gives direction for expanding educational alternatives that are effective for vulnerable youth.*** An accompanying paper entitled *APP Assessment Process* discusses the proposed methodology for assessing regional progress toward building a secondary system aimed at educating all youth.

The APP is being developed in conjunction with other efforts addressing dropout recovery including the Youth Transition Funders Group, Jobs for the Future, National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education and Families, American Youth Policy Forum and the Alternative High School Initiative. For more information on these initiatives, see Attachment I.

Please note that the views reflected in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Alternative Pathway Project owes special thanks to the hundreds of people across the country who are building alternative pathways piece by piece and shared their expertise for this project. We also thank Theron Cosgrave for his technical writing clarity and creativity. It is our hope that the framework outlined here will be fully integrated into high school reform strategies.

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# I: Rationale and Framework Overview

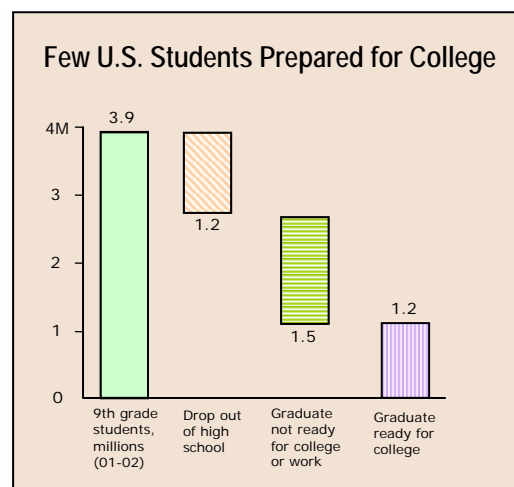
*“Young people need exposure to wisdom and knowledge and truth. They need to be exposed to new aspects of life; different possibilities. They need to be given that chance before they’re thrown away by society.”*

– Lance, 22

## The Silent Crisis

The notion that education – especially acquiring a high school diploma – is essential for all young people is hardly news. For the past decade policymakers, educators, and private foundations have stepped up efforts to create schools that serve the needs of ALL learners, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. As a result, many innovative new school models have emerged, and educators are speaking with unprecedented agreement on what it takes to ensure success for all. And in many places, student outcomes are improving.

Most school reform efforts to date have understandably focused on creating equitable schools where all graduates are prepared for college and careers. However, if educators and policymakers are truly committed to serving the needs of ALL young people, school reform conversations must include discussions about the millions of youth who are lost by their local schools. In fact, our nation’s population of high school-age youth falls relatively equally into three categories:



Source: NCES LEA CCD 2001-02; Manhattan Institute, 2003; American Diploma Project, 2003

- ❑ **Interrupted education:** Students who leave school because they have to work, have a baby, are incarcerated, or do not see a way to meet all the requirements for a high school diploma. In many urban and rural areas this group accounts for an astounding 50% of the high school-age population.
- ❑ **Struggling:** Those who are in school but are not on a track to complete high school in four years or may not have skills to pursue college without remediation or pursue career pathways beyond entry-level jobs.
- ❑ **On track for college:** Students performing at grade level or above who are on a “college prep” track that is aligned with entrance requirements for 4-year higher education.

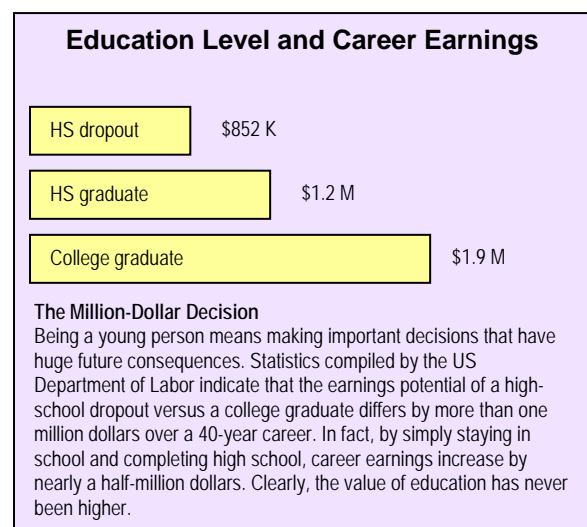
The demographics of the interrupted education group show a disproportionate number of low-income and students of color. Immigrants, those with learning disabilities, the homeless, youth in foster care, and those involved in the juvenile justice system are also overrepresented in this cohort. The statistics in some urban areas – where black males have only a 50-50 chance of completing high school – are simply unacceptable. Under the current system, a high school diploma is out of reach for most of these individuals. These students are usually left to their own

resources to find ways to continue or complete their education. Some find their way to GED programs or adult education options. Unfortunately, when disconnection from school persists for these youth, many lose their identity as students, never return to the classroom, and, as a result, face a limited range of career options. Communities clearly need something more than new and improved high schools, since well over a third of our youth have already left the education system. We need viable alternatives for youth at the margins.

The authors of this report believe that adults must take responsibility for the educational well-being of all youth – including those who have had their education “interrupted.” These improvements will take the collaborative efforts of many players, including school districts, alternative education providers, adult education officials, community colleges, workforce development agencies, child welfare officials, juvenile justice departments, youth organizers, youth advocates, research partners, and intermediary organizations.

Taking responsibility for the successful transitions of vulnerable youth is important for many reasons:

- ❑ Our country’s commitment to civil rights and social justice requires us to address the disproportionate number of children of color and those living in poverty that do not complete high school and enter adulthood without the skills needed for college.
- ❑ Our nation’s economic development ultimately depends on the quality of our human capital. There is a dramatic difference between having a 4<sup>th</sup> grade and 10<sup>th</sup> grade reading level, regardless if one has a high school diploma.
- ❑ Youth at risk still incur social costs, even if they no longer receive traditional educational services. As they try to negotiate the adult world without adequate skills, they may re-enroll in workforce development, adult education, or GED programs. They are prime candidates for public assistance programs, and have an increased risk of incarceration.
- ❑ Many current educational reforms, while intending to help all students succeed, fail to address youth who have already been “discarded” by traditional school options. A logical, systems-based approach would design reform efforts in context of a closed system, and would address 100% of students.
- ❑ Federal “No Child Left Behind” policies require schools to measure and achieve high outcomes for all students, regardless of race, class, or special needs. This focus on sub-groups creates the opportunity and necessity to expand our school reform conversation to include all types of students within – and outside – of our public education system.



## A Framework for Success

**Fortunately, there is hope. A growing body of research and an overwhelming chorus of anecdotal evidence show that all students – even those who are often labeled as slow, lazy, or troubled in traditional schools – can be productive and successful in creative educational settings that provide a personalized approach.** Alternative schools of all kinds are expanding across the country as part of the effort to re-enroll dropouts, create successful charter schools, and provide student-centered curricular choices. These schools are learning what it takes to effectively support youth in crisis, engage them in meaningful learning, and prepare them for successful futures in college and work.

As is often the case with complex reform efforts, the best practices in alternative education operate as isolated pockets of success. Some cities have promising alternative schools, while others leverage community partnerships to provide new and exciting options for youth at risk. Nationally, there are few, if any, places where alternative pathway approaches are aligned, coordinated, and systemic. And, the factors that contribute to dropout rates vary in cities and regions across the country.

To help meet the challenge of supporting youth at risk, this report outlines a framework of policies and practices that can help all students to be prepared for college and work. Titled the “Alternative Pathway Project” (APP), this framework addresses several key obstacles and opportunities facing educators and policymakers, including:

### Two Framework Prerequisites:

1. Balanced school reform
2. Early intervention strategies

### Six Framework Elements:

1. Shared responsibility and systemic coordination
2. Adequate supply of choice-based, high-quality alternatives
3. Ability to refer, transition and re-enroll
4. Guidance and advocacy
5. Flexible demonstrations of proficiency
6. Policy incentives

In order for educators, policymakers and private foundations to reach the goals of equity, high achievement, and increased readiness for college and work for all, it is imperative that the issues facing youth at risk are factored into the equation. Only then will talk of “ensuring high outcomes for all students” truly mean *all students*.

## Potential Risks in Building Alternative Pathways

At least two potential – and serious – risks exist in our secondary school reform efforts. The first is that by making schools more rigorous and alternative programs more plentiful, regular high schools may increase their “push-out” policies and practices. In addition to being educationally unsound, practices resulting in push-outs are blatantly discriminatory: a disproportionate

percentage of youth kicked out of local schools are black and Latino males. Instead of improving success for all youth, this approach instead risks strengthening the “school to prison pipeline” that is all too common in our schools today.

Two strategies mentioned later in this report can help mitigate this issue: first, schools must carefully identify and address the “unintended consequences” of their reforms. In addition, students must be given an element of choice in educational planning and placements. The primary goal of the Framework is to prepare all students for college and work, and as much as possible, this should be done within the context of the existing public school system.

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*“Over the past twenty-five years the situation for youth who fall off the ladder as they move to adulthood has gotten considerably worse. Education has become more important.”*

– Professor Michael Wald,  
Stanford University Law School

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The second serious risk is that alternative pathways can become a second-class system and further institutionalize tracking. In this scenario, students are channeled into weak alternative programs at the first sign of struggle, and policies and practices within the alternative system work to keep them stuck for the duration of their educational career. To a certain extent, this is already happening for students in select programs around the nation who find it nearly impossible to receive acceptance to a four-year college with only a GED or alternative diploma.

The risk of increased tracking can be avoided by following key principles discussed throughout this Framework. Features such as student choice, remaining open to re-enrollment, and ensuring quality measures so that separate isn’t unequal can help to steer the system away from blatant inequities. Taken together, these policies can build the perception – and the reality – that alternative schools are tied to a larger system of pathways that promise a future full of options for all youth.

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## II. Framework Prerequisites: Balanced School Reform and Early Intervention

*“My high school was structurally incapable of taking me seriously.”*

*– Student interviewed by K. Simon, Coalition of Essential Schools*

Two critical elements operate as prerequisites for the Alternative Pathway framework: balanced school reform and early intervention. Taken together, these foundational approaches lay the groundwork for the alternative pathway Framework discussed in part three of this report.

### Framework Prerequisite I: Balanced High School Reform

The high school reform movement has reached an interesting – and somewhat unintended – point in its development. As schools continue to raise expectations and use high-stakes tests, student achievement has generally improved. However, at the same time, dropout rates are increasing and more students are pursuing a GED. While the GED is a critical mechanism within the workforce development and adult education systems, many schools and students are now using it as an alternative diploma, even though it does not yet represent the same academic or economic value as a standard high school diploma. This is an example of an “unintended consequence” that results from a well-intentioned but unbalanced reform effort.

Reform policies have unintended consequences because they fail to take all three groups of students (interrupted education, struggling, and on-track for college) into account. While these change efforts may be well intended, they can impact students within and outside of the system in different ways. If reforms are to increase outcomes for all students and avoid creating additional problems, it is critical that we learn to balance the reform pillars of “rigor, relevance and relationships” for all types of students.

### Balancing Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships

#### **Rigor that is flexible (or “rigor without the mortis”)**

Raising expectations for high school students in terms of what they can learn and accomplish is an essential element of the reform movement. Strategies include eliminating low-level courses that track students into non-college pathways, aligning assessment practices across the curriculum, and increasing the number of credits required for graduation. However, in the haste to increase rigor, many schools create additional barriers and push-out policies that have the effect of reinforcing the traditional “sorting” roles of public education. The failure to hold high expectations for all students allows for “fade out”, “push out” and “keep out” policies to take hold. For example, using promotional gateways without companion strategies for rapid credit accrual creates a group of high school students that are “over age, under credit” with little chance of getting a diploma. Other examples of push-out policies include:

- Discharging students to GED programs or adult education
- Overuse of law enforcement, including school arrests and detaining students for truancy

- Requiring that students repeat entire courses with the same method of instruction
- Repeated suspensions for behavioral issues without opportunities to stay on top of coursework
- Referral to disciplinary schools that are not credit-bearing
- Long-term suspensions to disciplinary school without mechanisms to ensure re-enrollment and successful transition back into the comprehensive high school

#### **CASE STUDY: Seeking Balanced Reform in Chicago**

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has been working tirelessly to improve its public schools and now shows solid evidence of improvement at the elementary and middle school levels. The journey has not been without challenges, as evidenced by the city's increase in suspensions for behavioral issues. Still, CPS efforts to take into consideration all three groups of students (interrupted, struggling, and on-track) can be instructive. A critical element of their success may very well be their effective use of data, facilitated through a close partnership with the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR). This partnership enables district and school officials to examine the effectiveness of policies and rapidly respond to unintended consequences. Some of the highlights of Chicago's efforts include:

- CPS intentionally developed their district strategic plan to include alternative high schools and pathways for out of school youth.
- Ensuring 8<sup>th</sup> grade promotional gateway was not barrier to graduation. CPS worked closely with CCSR to ensure that the gateway was not increasing dropout rates. Creation of transition centers for 8<sup>th</sup> grade students not passing the exams. CPS quickly realized that the students were not succeeding when they entered comprehensive high schools, so they expanded transition centers into school-within-a-school Achievement Academies using the Talent Development model developed by Johns Hopkins University.
- Development of the Youth Connections Charter School, the umbrella for 24 alternative school campuses. Youth Connections Charter School serves approximately 1900 students with interrupted education per year.
- CPS fully analyzed the patterns of dropouts and of students in alternative schools. In response, they created an Office of Dropout Prevention and Recovery to expand and expedite re-enrollment and invested in new school models for older students with very few credits.

School officials must assure that these attempts at greater rigor remain flexible enough to provide options for struggling students and those with interrupted education. For example, schools might develop multiple performance assessment options (instead of just one) for students to demonstrate mastery on high stakes tests, or provide work-based learning environments so students can begin to imagine a life in which they are able to economically support themselves. Boston and New York City are developing policies that support multiple pathways to high school graduation. The key is to adopt a flexible approach that is grounded in the reality of actual students and their learning situations.

#### **Relevance that connects with students at risk**

School reform strategies that seek to improve academic relevance often include building small schools or smaller learning communities around themes or career fields. These approaches are a step in the right direction, but can do more to respond to the specific needs of youth at risk. In addition to relevant, work-based themes, programs can strive to connect to the passions, interests, and aspirations of individual students. One school that capitalizes on relevance is the Met, developed by the Big Picture Company in Providence, RI. Now being replicated across the country, the Met – a highly personalized school with a motto of “one student at a time” – draws out students’ interests and passions through real-life experience in the workplace and the

community. In other settings, educators are successfully integrating a “habits of work” approach across the curriculum to ensure that academic skills are connected to real-world career fields.

### **Relationships that keep students in the system**

High school is unlike other educational endeavors because compulsory attendance ends at around age 16 (varies by state). At this point, the relationship between schools, parents and students shifts from one that is held together by mandatory policy to one that only endures through quality and mutual commitment. Indeed, in studies of successful schools, students compare their schools to a family, and link their academic achievement to their caring relationships with teachers. In these schools, educators show support by investigating why students stop attending, by listening to what is going on in their lives and helping them find ways to complete school work, by helping them get resources or navigate problems, and by coupling high expectations with plenty of timely feedback.

The use of punitive disciplinary approaches may disrupt relationships instead of offering opportunities to strengthen understanding between students, parents and teachers. Furthermore, punitive techniques often overlook the chance of “teachable moments” in which students expand their understanding of their relationships to the school community. By contrast, some districts go to great lengths to maintain relational links. For example, some districts allow students referred to alternative schools to remain active in sports and arts offerings at their home school. Overall, the relationships pillar of the new “three R’s” must be upheld to be at least as important as rigor and relevance.

### **Reducing the Unintended Consequences of Unbalanced Reform**

As mentioned above, school reform efforts that fail to balance rigor, relevance and relationships for all types of students often result in unintended consequences. When one part of the balloon is squeezed (such as increasing graduation requirements), another part bulges out (like more students needing credit recovery options). Ironically, these unintentional consequences often fall most heavily on the shoulders of low-income and minority children – some of the very youth that the reforms were intended to assist.

By carefully looking for unintentional consequences through the lens of race and class, educators can check for practices of institutional racism that permeate many public systems. These patterns are found throughout most high schools:

#### **Common Inequitable Practices at High Schools**

##### **Teaching and Learning**

- Curriculum with limited perspectives of different cultures and learning styles
- Class assignment policies that rely on subjective perceptions and tracking

##### **Promotion and Retention Policies**

- Credit requirements that favor students with particular skills and interest
- Retention policies that label students for their entire high school careers

##### **Student Discipline**

- Suspension and expulsion policies that have a disproportionate impact on students of color
- Police relations characterized by misunderstanding and mistrust

*(common inequitable practices at high schools, continued)*

### **Testing and Accountability**

- Testing practices that penalize students with diverse learning styles
- School performance measures that fail to disaggregate data by race and class

### **School Structure and Operations**

- Calendars and schedules that create barriers for youth and for families where all adults work
- Budget formulas based on equality, not on need

### **Community Engagement and Public Relations**

- Parent communication tools that fail to account for diverse home languages
- Community engagement efforts that are culturally insensitive

Schools and districts that wish to examine their own policies and practices for patterns of institutional racism noted above can begin their analysis with questions such as:

- ❑ What is the rationale and desired impact of the reform or intervention? To what degree is the reform or intervention getting the desired result? Who is most impacted by the reform?
- ❑ What are the real or potential unintended consequences of the policy? What is the potential unintended impact on high poverty schools, disadvantaged children, and children in public care systems? On students with interrupted education, struggling students, and students who are on track for college?
- ❑ Is there a way to modify the strategy or protect against the unintended consequences? Is there another way to address the problem that would also encourage academic achievement, build relationships and sense of belonging, increase relevancy of education to youth?
- ❑ What underlying issues are shaping the problem, and how might these issues be addressed?

## **Framework Prerequisite II: Early Intervention**

Today in U.S. high schools an increasing proportion of students who enter the ninth grade fail to graduate four years later. And of the students who do drop out, more leave school during their 9<sup>th</sup> grade year than at any other time. This brings us to our second prerequisite: early intervention. In order to help youth at risk stay in school, a two-step strategy is needed.

### **STEP 1: Early Identification of Students at Risk Using Academic and Behavioral Indicators**

Although it is impossible to predict exactly which children will drop out of school, there are clear indicators of youth at risk.

The first set of indicators is academic. Recent research suggests that educational outcomes in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade are good predictors of which students will graduate and which will drop out. Thus, students who perform substantially below grade level in reading and math, are behind in their course credits or grade level, and have high absenteeism all warrant special attention. In addition, a set of behavioral indicators must also be considered. Truancy, repeated instances of disciplinary referrals or suspensions, drug use, pregnancy, and weapons violations should act as

red flags for school officials in their efforts to identify students at risk of disconnecting from school.

Given the large percentage of students who drop out during the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, districts must use these academic and behavioral indicators to identify students at risk no later than 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Districts must ensure that these students actually enroll in high school, and should provide these youth with summer school and transitional programs to facilitate a smooth entry to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. During the school year, officials should continuously monitor academic and behavioral indicators of these special young students.

## **STEP 2: Early Academic and Developmental Support**

Once students have been identified as at risk for school disconnection using the academic and behavioral indicators above, schools and districts must act immediately to provide the appropriate supports. This will require adequate resources and appropriate strategies, such as:

### **Ensure Rapid Access to Targeted Services**

In order to support students at risk of disconnection, schools and districts must provide immediate access to academic and behavioral support programs that target the individual needs of each student. For many districts, the first step will be to collect and analyze data on students at risk in order to determine the areas of greatest need. Once priority areas have been established, officials can examine existing supports, research best practices from the field, and work to develop additional programs and interventions. Examples of targeted supports may include pull-out programs, strategic tutoring (including computer-based approaches), adult mentors, and referral to health and social services. New York City, as an example, is using “Ramp Up,” a program developed by the National Center for Education and the Economy to help all its high school students achieve the reading skills necessary to participate in high school courses.

Unfortunately, simply offering an academic or behavioral support program doesn’t ensure that the right students will find their way to the programs. In many schools and communities, a bewildering array of services already exists – the primary problem is one of communication and coordination between agencies, services, and programs. And for children in foster care, those involved in the juvenile justice system, and those that have responsibility for taking care of families, simultaneously navigating the labyrinth of support-related agencies, forms, appointments, and requirements can be overwhelming. Districts and communities are encouraged to use service brokers, interagency coordination and joint case management to help these youth benefit from the services provided by multiple public providers before they reach the point of dropping out of school.

### **Strengthen School-to-Family Relationships**

One useful leverage point for schools trying to support students at risk of dropping out is to work explicitly on strengthening school-to-family ties. When schools forge productive partnerships with parents and guardians, both can provide consistent expectations, boundaries, and support for youth. Engaging parents who have traditionally been disconnected from school settings is no easy task, but many schools are making headway on this issue through creative approaches such as meetings off campus at places of worship, offering translation services at public gatherings, and pot-luck dinners.

### **CASE STUDY: Building Relationships in Sacramento**

An innovative parent engagement program in Sacramento, CA, has reaped positive rewards for students, parents, and schools. Through the program, the school district partners with a community organizing group called ACT (All Congregations Together, part of the Pacific Institute for Community Organization, or PICO) to strengthen relationships between parents and educators through home visits.

When started at an elementary school with an extraordinarily high suspension rate, the program enabled the school to get back on track and refocus on learning. Since then, the Home Visit Project has been expanded to two district high schools and has plans to add additional campuses.

The informal teacher-led home visit meetings help to build positive and productive relationships between parents, students, and their teachers at the beginning of the school year and have led to higher achievement, fewer truancy and disciplinary problems, and a more positive school culture.

In Sacramento, ACT has used a small learning community structure to reduce the number of homes that individual teachers must visit. In other high schools, advisory or home room structures will be used to keep the home visit load manageable for individual teachers.

In Chicago, TARGET, a community organization, helped to improve attendance through outreach to community members. In New York City, the United Way operates the Community Achievement Project in the Schools (CAPS), a program that partners social service providers with schools to address attendance and truancy.

### **Provide Timely Choices and Referral to High Quality Alternatives**

For students who exhibit severe academic and behavioral risk factors – especially 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders – schools and districts must work quickly to connect them to high quality alternative programs before they exit the school system altogether. One key element in this approach is to give students and their families viable choices among different alternatives. For many districts,

this will require broadening menus of alternative options and changing enrollment policies from punitive referral-based approaches to preventative strategies that accept struggling students well before they fall behind in credits. A damaging trend evidenced in communities nationwide is the tendency for school districts to contract with a single disciplinary school provider. This setup makes it impossible for principals or parents to appropriately refer students. One size does not fit all, especially when it comes to developmental needs of adolescents.

Providing early support and alternative placement is especially important for students who view school as a hostile environment. For some urban youth traveling to school is unsafe, as it requires crossing the boundary lines of rival gangs. For others, harsh disciplinary policies, threats of violence from peers, and lack of meaningful adult connections have poisoned the waters of the comprehensive campus. These youth need timely referrals and a fresh start in a safe, supportive, and high-quality academic setting.

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### III. The Alternative Pathway Framework

*“If you can show me how to cling to that which is real to me, while teaching me a way into the larger society, then I will not only drop my defenses and my hostility, but I will sing your praises and I will help you to make the desert bear fruit.”*

– Ralph Ellison

In most communities across the nation alternative pathway systems are like a house without a blueprint: instead of being carefully designed using a master plan, these homes feature a hodgepodge of rooms that have been added at various times in various places, often as stopgap measures, and have been connected to each other in odd and inconvenient ways. This challenging layout comes as no surprise, given the limitations faced by those who built the structures. Our most vulnerable youth deserve better.

The resources and momentum of the school reform movement have created a critical window of opportunity for an “extreme makeover” of our alternative education system as well. The Alternative Pathway Project seeks to take advantage of this opportunity by using a comprehensive framework of best practices to redesign the alternative pathways in communities across the nation.

What would a framework for a well-designed alternative pathway system look like? While the specific pieces will vary from one context to the next, we have identified six critical elements that must be in any effective system. In communities where the data on youth outcomes shows that comprehensive high schools successfully serve over 90% of youth, the elements below may help tune up the system to push the total up to 100%. By contrast, in areas where 50-60% of high school age youth drop out and fall into the interrupted education category, a more systemic approach is needed to increase re-enrollment while simultaneously supporting high school reform efforts. The APP Framework is outlined as follows:

#### **The Alternative Pathways Project Framework**

**GOAL:** Develop alternative educational pathways that increase graduation rates AND prepare all students for college and work

**PREREQUISITES:** Balanced school reform and early intervention

**FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS:**

1. Shared responsibility and systemic coordination
2. Adequate supply of choice-based, high-quality alternatives
3. Ability to refer, transition, and re-enroll
4. Guidance and advocacy
5. Flexible demonstrations of proficiency
6. Policy incentives

## 1. Shared Responsibility and Systemic Coordination

The first APP Framework element calls for a conceptual shift that has practical implications. The shift asks us to move beyond our limited concerns for the students in “our school” or “our program” to a broader, more inclusive view that truly cares about each and every child in the entire community. Only by adopting a perspective of *shared responsibility* will states and communities be able to marshal resources and build the public support needed to meet the challenge of preparing all students for college and work.

This broadened perspective carries with it several implications. One practical result of sharing responsibility is that adults must also *share data and information* on youth. Many school districts, for example, need to update their data systems to track students who have left their schools and are currently invisible to the public agenda. In several of the cities researched for this report, graduation rates were officially reported to be near 70%. However, using a cohort method of accounting, the actual rates were closer to 50%. In addition, when public care providers make critical choices about the well-being of youth, it is essential that decision-makers are informed by the perspective and information of educational professionals. By working together, officials can develop strategies such as common databases, memos of understanding and collaborative case management forums that will ultimately result in greater support for vulnerable youth.

This will necessitate careful data collection on the specific academic and developmental needs of youth within each community. With a common perspective, adults throughout the community should share effective practices and promising strategies in their work with local youth. For example, all educators and youth service providers need to be aware of the latest youth development principles to ensure that all young people have better outcomes and options. School officials must know about the critical nature of public support services in the lives of students who face chaotic home lives, and all adults must understand how to support students who have been traumatized by community violence.

### CASE STUDY: Organized to Partner in Boston

Communities in the best position to address the educational needs of all students (interrupted education, struggling, and on-track) are those who have effectively organized themselves to partner with the school district. Rather than requiring the school district to partner with each group separately, stakeholder groups have organized themselves into networks that allow system building. Boston is one of the best examples:

**Parents:** The Boston Parent Organizing Network (BPON) is made up of a diverse group of 36 member organizations, all committed to engaging parents in education. The ongoing work of these groups is helping to reconnect parents and communities to the educational and decision making processes in the Boston Public Schools. BPON supports these efforts by acting as a central connection where ideas, information, and strategies to empower parents and build partnerships are shared.

**Employers:** Established in 1982, the Boston Compact is the agreement that lays the foundation for school improvement and guarantees the commitment of business partners and higher education to Boston Public School graduates. The Boston Private Industry Council is an employer-led intermediary that connects youth and adults of Boston to education and employment opportunities to meet the demands of employers in a changing economy.

**Youth Programs:** Youth programs and alternative schools have developed the Youth Service Providers Network to engage youth in a continuum of alternative education and career exploration opportunities. The Network is able to negotiate with the Boston Public Schools on ways to improve access for youth to complete their education. The network also invests in program improvement among its members.

### New Partners

In many cities, the probation services are often ineffective systems, plagued by high detention and recidivism rates and unacceptable disparities in treatment for youth of color compared to white youth. Yet, as probation offices commit to reforms, they become critically important partners in ensuring that young people get their education back on track. In Chicago's Cook County, the Probation office runs "Jumpstart," a transitional program to help students regain their identity as students and refresh their academic skills.

Another concrete implication of shared responsibility involves building *coordinating mechanisms* that can serve to provide leadership and alignment for youth pathways across the community. School districts and public care agencies such as child welfare, foster care, and juvenile justice need to sit down together and articulate how they can provide seamless services for youth. In a similar manner, links with workforce development agencies, community colleges and universities need to be fostered to ensure success for youth at

risk. The college track is well designed to help students move from high school to college. Students in alternative pathways need similar transition programs to help them gain access to college and career opportunities. The combined efforts of officials at all levels will be critical in building such a system.

While everyone agrees that systemic coordination is a good idea, few communities have been successful in doing it. Why not? Frankly, few have the time, energy, or financial backing to lead such an effort. Unless *leadership and external factors push for collaboration*, the inertia of the system keeps people in their silos. Many communities are finding that the "convener" role can best be filled by intermediary organizations that exist to support the improved services.

Element 1	<i>Indicators of shared responsibility and systemic coordination might include:</i>
	<input type="checkbox"/> Availability of information to identify youth, serve youth, and support policymakers
	<input type="checkbox"/> Shared understanding and use of best practices in youth development
	<input type="checkbox"/> Public care systems take into account educational outcomes in performance management and student information systems
	<input type="checkbox"/> Existence of community-wide coordinating councils that provide oversight for all elements of traditional and alternative educational programs
	<input type="checkbox"/> Clearly defined agreements between public and educational agencies
	<input type="checkbox"/> Workforce development options integrated into education pathways
	<input type="checkbox"/> Community colleges have relationships and memos of understanding with alternative education providers

## 2. Adequate Supply of Choice-Based, High-Quality Alternatives

The second element in the APP Framework urges school districts and partnering agencies to develop a portfolio of choice-based, high-quality schools and alternatives to meet the needs and desires of their vulnerable youth.

In this model it is imperative that all educational alternatives within a community allow for *choice* as a primary factor for determining student placement. Students ultimately determine when school isn't working for them – usually by dropping out. However, if they are included in formal decisions about where they attend school, they are much more likely to be invested in

## Alternative School Types

*Alternative schools are as diverse as the students they serve. Here are some of the most common types of programs found in cities across the nation:*

**Comprehensive Alternative Schools** – A small environment, set up as a 4-year program that culminates in a diploma. Features courses and programs that mirror some of what might be found in a traditional high school, although much more closely focused on the interests and needs of the student population.

**Targeted Schools** – These programs are designed to meet the needs of special populations of students such as alternative learning style students, court-involved youth, etc. They may have enrollment requirements and tend to be small and homogeneous. Generally, students complete their diploma in two years.

**Integrated Services Schools** – These schools provide substantial services or partner closely with public services such as child care, housing, mental health, etc. in order to support and retain special populations of youth.

**Transitional Schools** – Usually set up to last one year or less, these programs rarely offer diplomas and often are dead-end, compliance-based schools for youth who determined to be troublemakers. However, some innovate transitional schools are helping students who didn't get their diploma make the transition to college. Examples include Another Route to College in Massachusetts and CUNY Prep in New York City. Overall, transitional schools need new ways to be evaluated for quality and student outcomes and must be connected to viable future options for youth.

their personal success. In addition, policies that track students into programs punitively must be eliminated, and students must be allowed to remain in programs that are working for them.

A second issue involves capacity. In many cities and regions, there are simply not enough “slots” in existing alternative programs to serve the number of students seeking these options. The problem can be broken down into financial difficulties, and a system that has traditionally discounted dropout students. Compounding the issue, the standards movement has resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum at many comprehensive high schools, eliminating work-based and vocational courses which often provide the greatest points of engagement for struggling students. To remedy the situation, communities must *determine the mix and scope of programming needed* to meet the educational needs and respond to the life circumstances of their youth. This requires schools and communities to fully budget for educating all of their youth, rather than incorporating dropout rates into their school budgets. For example, after research identified a large unmet need in New York City, investments were directed toward creating Young Adult Borough Centers – schools for older students with few credits. Similarly, Houston established an evening school targeting the needs of newcomers. Making cost-effective investments in a portfolio of schools will also increase the need for regional collaboration and coordination, mentioned in the first element of the APP Framework.

Determining the right mix of programs will require an analysis of what is currently available and what is needed. Traditionally, educational alternatives have been designed to serve youth at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level or above with GED programs that run between 9 months and 2 years in length. Yet, most students leave school before age 16 with less than 8<sup>th</sup> grade skills, or exit the system later, needing only a few course credits for a diploma.

Also, there is usually a pool of older youth who have less than 8<sup>th</sup> grade literacy skills and very poor “soft” skills and need support that integrates work-based experience with literacy development. These young people may have actually experienced so much failure that they have lost their identity as students and learners.

Each of these groups of students needs a different type of school design. Only after analyzing the specific academic and developmental needs of sub-groups of youth within each community will officials be able to build an effective set of pathways. And, as student needs change over time, adjustments to the system will be necessary.

### CASE STUDY: Expanding Options in New York City

*New York City's Department of Education is leading the way in creating multiple strategies for struggling students and out of school youth. Following an analysis of the needs of dropout and disengaged youth, they began to invest in multiple pathways for young people to earn a diploma, prepare for postsecondary study, and gain access to college and careers. NYC has a special focus on meeting the needs of struggling students who are over-age and under-credit including expanding Young Adult Borough Centers and initiating Learning to Work. Some of the city's options for youth include:*

- **Young Adult Borough Centers.** These centers target students age 17 and over who have 17+ credits. Students stay enrolled in their school of origin and receive appropriate services through centers operated by community-based organizations in partnership with high schools. Services and classes are offered in the afternoon and evening. A community partner provides youth development supports, counseling, and assistance with job placement.
- **Learning to Work.** Launched in 2005 as part of a new vocational initiative targeted to vulnerable youth, Learning to Work, helps youth accrue the vocational and educational credentials they need. The program connects youth to careers in growing sectors of the economy through study programs, internships, and paid work. Students participate in either a full-day educational program, an evening high school program, or a literacy program – all with workforce connections.
- **Transfer Schools:** Designed for students that have failed at other schools, transfer schools support students in completing their diploma. For example, Manhattan Night and Day Comprehensive, an integrated services model, serves 800 older, nontraditional students ages 17 to 21. Students can attend either night or day classes, while working full-time and attending to other responsibilities. Over 90% of seniors graduate; 60% go to college immediately, virtually all others finish high school already employed.

*In addition, innovate schools are being developed by community organizations and higher education, to meet the needs of specific groups of students.*

- **Community Prep High School.** This school offers a transitional learning environment for young people recently released from prison or jail. Opened in September 2003, Community Prep was developed by CASES – a non-profit that provides a range of community-based sanctions to adult and juvenile offenders. Not a typical diploma granting high school, Community Prep is a highly structured transitional school that helps young people re-engage in the act of learning. Students learn to negotiate between the pull of the streets and preparation for a future of work, and learn to use skills for controlling frustration and anger.
- **CUNY Prep.** This transitional school, developed by the City University of New York, is designed to ensure college access for students who did not receive high school diplomas. CUNY offers students with 8<sup>th</sup> grade or higher skills a chance to complete a curriculum aligned with college level skills and a GED.

Educators must also ensure that all new and existing pathways are of *high quality*. In many districts the quality of alternative programs – especially those designed to deal with students with behavioral issues – is not being adequately monitored. Improving school quality will be a long-term effort, requiring the development of quality standards, student performance benchmarks, and program evaluation tools. Some measure of student learning gains must be incorporated into the evaluation of alternative schools to ensure that they don't operate as "dumping grounds" for districts that are struggling with challenging students.

Fortunately, much work has already been done in the area of determining best practices. For example, research on Job Corps, youth corps, and career academies tell us that the blending of work and learning, personalized instruction, and strong relationships are all effective elements of alternative education. For alternative schools, two sets of standards are already available: the

Alternative High School Initiative has created a set of *Distinguishers* to guide alternative school development, and the National Youth Employment Coalition designed a set of criteria for youth education through their Education Development Network (EdNet) initiative.

<b>Element 2</b>	<p><i>Indicators of an adequate supply of high-quality, choice-based alternatives might include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Student choice and continuity honored for placement decisions at all levels of the system</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> School district and partnering agencies assess educational needs of struggling students and out of school youth</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> School district and partnering agencies expand the number of alternative educational opportunities to meet demand; waiting lists eliminated</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Memos of understanding in place between alternative education providers and school districts</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Quality standards for alternative educational pathways in place and providers regularly evaluated using the standards</li> </ul>
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### 3. Ability to Refer, Transition, and Re-Enroll

The third element in the APP Framework suggests that the doors to alternative pathways “open both ways” through flexible referral, transition, and re-enrollment policies. Students who are likely to drop out of school will feel and respond differently if they have a choice in selecting the setting that best meets their needs, if they are able to stay where they are thriving, and if they are able to re-enroll in their local high school or alternative school without bureaucratic barriers.

When students are in the process of dropping out (which generally happens over an extended period of time, not just at one particular moment), students and parents must be engaged in a conversation about the complete range of alternatives. School officials must work with them to create a plan for staying in school, or, when necessary, make referrals to alternative programs. Formal *referral systems* reduce the amount of a time a student is out of school – and the longer a student is out of school, the more difficult it is to fully re-connect them again.

Equally important is the ability of students to *re-enroll* in school in a timely manner. Depending on life circumstances, some young people may need to leave school and re-enroll repeatedly.

Youth in foster care will need to re-enroll when they change placements, youth released from detention often must re-enroll as part of their probation, migrant youth and those that need to work may leave and resume school at different times of the year, and young people who have children may temporarily leave school. Youth in disciplinary schools especially need options to make up credits quickly and reenter the diploma track. Comprehensive schools must lower the barriers to re-enrollment and make pursuing an education a realistic and enticing

#### **CASE STUDY: Re-Engaging Portland Youth**

A partnership between Portland (OR) Public Schools and the Coalition of Metropolitan Area Community Based Schools (CMAC) is one of the nation’s most innovative efforts to re-engage youth.

- CMAC is made up of over 20 alternative schools.
- Twenty percent of all Portland public high school students were served by community-based alternative providers in 2003-04.
- Thirty-seven percent of these students were 19-21 years old and would not have been served at all in the mainstream system.
- Fifteen percent were direct referrals from PPS of students before they dropped out. Designated as “early leavers,” these students stay on the rolls of their home school while receiving services elsewhere.

option. In some cities, districts partner with alternative schools to provide direct outreach to students who fail to return to school at the beginning of each new academic year.

Finally, it is imperative that school systems set up mechanisms to ensure that all 8<sup>th</sup> graders successfully enroll in high school. The increasing number of students that drop out before 9<sup>th</sup> grade is of great concern. These students are usually not even included in official dropout rates.

In order to build adequate referral and re-enrollment systems, officials must:

- ❑ Share information between school district and alternative programs so that out-of-school youth can be found and recruited for alternative programs that re-connect them to learning.
- ❑ Provide staff and specialists to seek out youth that have dropped out, expedite re-enrollment, and provide transitional support.
- ❑ Monitor dropout referral, transition, and re-enrollment programs to ensure that they are working as intended and that youth have positive outcomes.

<b>Element 3</b>	<p><i>Indicators of the ability to refer, transition, and re-enroll might include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ List of alternative schools available to parents and students</li> <li>❑ School district has policy and procedures to respond to students when attendance drops substantially, student doesn't return to school, or student terminates enrollment</li> <li>❑ School district has expedited process for re-enrolling students</li> <li>❑ School district provides advocates who works explicitly to re-enroll dropouts and ensure students don't leave the system during critical transitions</li> <li>❑ School district has relationships with child welfare, juvenile justice, and other key public systems to expedite process of re-enrollment</li> </ul>
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#### 4. Guidance and Advocacy

The fourth APP Framework element calls for the development of formal guidance and advocacy mechanisms to support vulnerable youth.

There are many reasons why parents and primary caregivers may not be able to provide sufficient support and guidance for their students: financial challenges that require them to work out of the home for extended hours, language barriers that make interactions with school officials all but impossible, and their child's inability to overcome powerful peer influences are but a few possible causes. One of the key reasons that youth find themselves in trouble and/or out of school is because their

#### **Program Gap for Fragile Learners**

Many young people who fail to graduate also lack the skills necessary to enter GED programs and often find their way to adult education programs that are ill-prepared to help prepare for college or careers. One significant finding discovered for this study was the need for more schools designed or targeted for students with low literacy, few credits and fragile identities as students.

One promising program is Community Prep developed by CASES, a community organization. Community Prep offers court-involved youth that are having difficulties making the transition back into school a safe and structured environment. Other programs include Zenith run by Harris County Office of Education (TX), a short-term program that focuses on students developing specific behavioral and interpersonal skills and Jumpstart run by Cook County Probation that prepares students for returning to school, makes referrals, and provides transitional services.

### Coordinating Tools

A new diploma requirement for Oregon's graduating class of 2007 states that "each student will develop an education plan and build an education profile." The education plan is the blueprint that guides learning activities and prepares students for a successful transition to post HS experiences, while the profile serves to document and check the student's progress and achievement, communicating to others their accomplishments. The plan and profile are intended to work together as coordinating tools, encouraging each student to plan, monitor and manage his/her own education and career development.

This example demonstrates the transfer of control from the system to the individual learner. Creating a standardized process to "check in" also allows a safety net, preventing students from taking courses that do not help to move them toward their ultimate educational goals.

families lack the social capital and know-how to support children during the tumultuous teenage years.

Left to their own devices, many of these vulnerable youth are unable to open the doors to the future. For these students obtaining a transcript, a special education referral, or letter of recommendation can be overwhelming tasks. If these vulnerable youth are to make successful transitions to adulthood, they will need knowledgeable adult *advocates to help them negotiate* public and educational support systems. The presence of caring mentors who can sit beside youth in meetings that determine their future, and who can speak up for youth who have no one else to vouch for them can make a tremendous difference.

Advocates can also be instrumental in *identifying barriers* and working with public institutions to alleviate the negative circumstances. Some districts may find the best solution to be the program liaison approach, mentioned in APP Framework element 3 above. For example, the Chicago liaison model places school representatives in city probation offices to help with education planning and to expedite the transition back into school. In New York City, Advocates for Children runs a program for youth in family courts who are about to be remanded for failing to meet the condition of probation that they be in school. By finding appropriate placements, Advocates for Children has seen the graduation rates increase to 85% of these highly vulnerable students.

### CASE STUDY: Guiding Youth in Houston

Educators in Houston, Texas have made a point of providing guidance and advocacy for their vulnerable youth. Some of their efforts in this area include:

- ❑ Hiring ten dropout specialists responsible for outreach, referral, and helping students who have left the system to make a smooth transition back into school.
- ❑ Development of a thriving partnership with Communities in Schools (CIS) to broker a range of services for youth at risk, including personal guidance, academic support, career awareness and employment opportunities, and referrals to medical service providers. CIS operates in the schools under a memo of understanding with the Houston School District.
- ❑ Development of a partnership between the school district and ALTA Academy to provide direct outreach to students who fail to return to school at the beginning of each new academic year
- ❑ Offering integrated service schools such as George I. Sanchez Charter High School sponsored by the Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans, that provide child care, residences, career opportunities, and case management.
- ❑ Creation of an initiative announced in 2004 called Graduation Expectation, designed to identify an adult advocate for every student. Adults who serve as student advocates range from teachers to administrators to CIS case managers, and are all assigned by the school.

In addition, schools and districts can put structural systems in place that foster greater personalization and adult guidance. One successful strategy used on many campuses is a school-wide advisory program. Advisories typically connect groups of 12-15 students with a responsible adult (teacher, administrator, classified staff member, or community volunteer) for meetings 2-3 times per week. Advisors usually stay with the same students for 2-4 years and help to connect students to academic and social services, assist with college application procedures, and generally support students in a setting that is less formal than the traditional classroom.

Another district-wide guidance strategy is the Individual Learning Plan or ILP. Modeled after the Individual Education Plan (IEP) approach long used in special education, the ILP is a customized planning tool that helps every student to map a path through high school and beyond.

<b>Element 4</b>	<p><i>Indicators of guidance and advocacy might include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Adult advocates paired with vulnerable youth during early teen years</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Educational and public care systems collaborate to ensure every child is represented by a third-party advocate in formal meetings, conferences, and hearings</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> System-wide transparency and openness regarding student data, information, and best practices</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Communities work together to provide parenting skills workshops with an advocacy focus for parents of teens</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Schools have advisory programs and Individual Education Plans in place</li> </ul>
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## 5. Flexible Demonstrations of Proficiency

The APP Framework’s fifth element calls for schools and alternative programs that allow students to accrue credits and advance through the system using flexible options such as mastery-based demonstrations of learning.

In many high schools today students are required to jump through multiple hoops in order to earn a diploma. First, they must accrue adequate course credits, calculated using traditional Carnegie unit seat time formulas. Next, they must pass high-stakes standardized tests, many of which are misaligned with what is actually taught in the classroom. Finally, in some schools, students must also pass end-of-course final exams.

While these requirements are designed to increase academic rigor and better prepare students for college entrance requirements, they often have the effect of generating barriers and disincentives for students with difficult life circumstances and those who fall significantly behind in their academic progress. As a result, communities are filled with many youth who are “over-age and under-credit.” These students are

**Rethinking School Time**

*Few traditions in American education run deeper than the 8-to-3 school day and the September-to-June school year. However, many schools today are now creating unique schedules and calendars to meet the needs of youth at risk. Some of the innovative approaches include:*

**Night schools:** Some programs, such as the Manhattan Comprehensive Night and Day School offer instruction in the day, in the evening, and on the weekends. This approach works well for youth who need to work to support their families.

**Flex time:** Responding to “consumer demand”, some smaller programs are able to customize their schedules and offer instruction at times convenient to youth, including evenings and weekends. Houston’s ALTA Academy program uses 6-week cycles in which students take two 2-hour classes per day.

**Intercession:** By adopting year-round or modified year-round calendars, schools open up stretches of time – often ranging in length from two weeks to two months – that can be used for building students’ skills, offering enrichment courses, or providing additional training for staff.

ill-suited to traditional schools and need practical solutions that allow them to make up for lost time to advance their education.

Through a *competency-based* approach to instruction and assessment that rewards student learning and not just seat time, students can accelerate learning and make rapid progress toward a diploma, and are more likely to engage in their studies as they see the relevance and tangible rewards of learning and demonstrating concrete skills and concepts. Instead of being trapped in the box of grade levels, ability grouping, tracked courses, and course enrollment limitations, students could move through experiences where they gain and demonstrate knowledge and skills.

Perhaps the best state-level example comes from Oregon. In 2002, the Oregon Board of Education created a System Integration subcommittee that explored shifting the educational model from a “time as constant; proficiency as variable” model to the reverse, allowing students to demonstrate proficiency and move through the system based on mastery. However, like many educational systems in the country, Oregon schools are managed through local school boards, and the state leadership is reluctant to create additional unfunded mandates. The compromise was to *allow* local districts to grant credit for proficiency and provide technical assistance in developing measures which would allow credits to be awarded if mastery was demonstrated. This

strategy allows a proficiency-based and a time-based system to operate in tandem without disrupting the financial model that is aligned with units of instruction based on seat time. Though still early in its implementation, this model presents a viable strategy to respond to the growing number of learners who leave the system early and too often define school as a “holding tank.”

Employers and community partners can play an important role in this effort, helping schools determine standards for benchmarks, developing certification programs for students to demonstrate industry-level work, and providing relevant opportunities for students to apply learning in the real world. In addition, schools can use computer-based programs to accelerate student learning and advancement.

### **Diploma Plus: *Measuring Competency, Not Seat Time***

Developed in Massachusetts and now adapted in over ten sites, the Diploma Plus (DP) model features two stages of student performance: the Presentation Level and the Plus Phase. At the Presentation Level, students work on assignments and projects with clearly defined academic standards and benchmarks. They also compile, present, and defend a portfolio that contains their best work across subjects. Students are promoted to the Plus Phase when they show they have met the competencies, regardless of the amount of time they have been in the program.

The Plus Phase moves students into the world beyond high school while maintaining strong connections to the high school program. They enroll in college courses and work on internships and a community service project. They also participate in a small group seminar, in which they prepare for college, build additional skills, receive tutoring, and support one another.

DP graduates receive a full high school diploma, but also acquire strong academic and life skills, valuable work experience, and college credits that can be applied to a future college degree.

<b>Element 5</b>	<p><i>Indicators of flexible demonstrations of proficiency might include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Students responsible for monitoring their development of clearly delineated competencies</li> <li>❑ School districts and states offer credits for proficiency as an alternative to Carnegie Unit requirements</li> <li>❑ Schooling designed to accelerate learning through experiences and subjects that are highly relevant to students, independent study, and computer-aided coursework</li> <li>❑ Employer and higher education partners help schools develop skill and content standards for certificates and diplomas</li> <li>❑ Credit granted for community and work-based learning.</li> </ul>
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## 6. Policy Incentives

The sixth and final element of the APP Framework looks at the critical area of policy incentives.

Schools and districts across the nation today face conflicting and weak incentives to help dropouts reconnect to education. Funding streams have diminished and there is a lack of dedicated resources to youth outside of the school system. When funds are available, officials must negotiate a bureaucratic labyrinth of county offices of education, district offices, school sites, and public care agencies. As a result, educational opportunities are rationed in many communities, and dropout youth too often are no longer a priority. While a primary incentive to help every child already exists – ADA funding that stays at the school with the student – lawmakers still need attractive policies for dropout support which are financially feasible to states, districts, and schools. Without these incentives in place, young people will continue to leave high school unprepared, shifting the social burden to early childhood, safety net, and public safety programs.

The fiscal infrastructure of our nation’s high schools was built on top of an educational system designed to promote only the best students. Thus, the tracking, budgeting, and allocation methods used in most schools not only obscure the real costs per child, but also wind up shortchanging students who need the most assistance. Fiscal models are needed that measure the actual costs of educating all students, from traditional to alternative programs; at present we are unaware of any such models. In the meantime, by using fiscal coordination and employing budgeting systems where the funds follow the child, communities can begin move from a zero-sum model to one where resources are pooled from many sources to meet the needs of youth throughout the system. In some cases, even per-pupil formulas must be challenged to consider spending money where learning

### **Positive Policy Environment for Alternative Pathways in Oregon**

Oregon state policy features several elements that ensure districts have the flexibility to re-engage students whose education has been interrupted. Through this policy, the state:

- Formally defines alternative education as “the school designed to best serve students’ educational needs and interests.”
- Clearly makes districts responsible to maintain flexible learning options. Districts must notify parents and students of the options available.
- Allows students in alternative schools to earn credits in a variety of ways including competency-based methods, portfolios, or project-based learning.
- Offers a financing strategy in legislation that supports alternative schools by assisting with a share of the state ADA funding.

needs are the greatest. And as a practical matter, districts need to begin budgeting for dropout recovery and the increased costs associated with a higher graduation rate.

Below are some approaches that policymakers could use to powerful incentives for traditional as well as alternative schools:

- ❑ **Measure and fund learning:** School finances are currently based on a formulas tied to the accumulation of Carnegie units in order to provide teachers and classroom infrastructure. However, if learning – not seat time – was the key measurement, schools would face powerful incentives to succeed with every child. Seat-time waivers alone are insufficient; school-wide, standards-driven, proficiency-based models are needed.
- ❑ **Reward instructional improvement:** While most districts offer pay increases to teachers who complete additional college coursework, these rewards are totally unrelated to instructional improvement. Until teacher evaluations and pay structures are tied to student learning gains, we fear teachers will have fewer incentives to improve their craft. Schools need to develop practical ways to measure and reward rigor, relevance, and relationships in the classroom.
- ❑ **Pave the way for system-wide collaboration:** States and districts need to remove the barriers to collaboration and reward innovative joint efforts between comprehensive and alternative schools. For example, both Iowa and Massachusetts have passed legislation to organize and value the brokering and connecting functions usually left up to undercapitalized education budgets.

Finally, discipline-oriented schools are one group of alternative schools that are in desperate need of incentives to improve. As mentioned in element two of this framework, all too often these Transitional Schools lack quality standards and lock students into dead-end tracks. A thoughtful array of incentives and mandates is needed to move these institutions to change.

<b>Element 6</b>	<i>Indicators of policy incentives might include:</i>
	❑ Funding follows students who are suspended, expelled or re-enrolled in alternative placement
	❑ Schools budget for early intervention costs, alternative education, and re-enrollment
	❑ Financial incentives reward schools and programs that succeed with students
	❑ Teachers rewarded for instructional improvement and learning gains by their students
	❑ Alternative schools are provided with incentives to accelerate learning and maintain high standards

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# ATTACHMENT I: Related Efforts Supporting the Development of Alternative Schools and Alternative Pathways

## Alternative High School Initiative

In 2002, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, in collaboration with the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Kellogg Foundation, and Walter S. Johnson Foundation invested in improving and expanding alternative education models. With coordination provided by the Big Picture Company, the following models are being replicated:

- ❑ Diploma Plus developed by Commonwealth Corporation  
[www.commcorp.org](http://www.commcorp.org)
- ❑ Maya Angelou Charter School developed by See Forever  
[www.seeforever.org](http://www.seeforever.org)
- ❑ Performance Learning Schools developed by Communities in Schools Georgia  
[www.cisga.org/PLCinfo.html](http://www.cisga.org/PLCinfo.html)
- ❑ Black Alliance for Educational Options  
[www.baeo.org](http://www.baeo.org)
- ❑ Street Schools  
[www.nass.org](http://www.nass.org)
- ❑ YouthBuild Schools  
[www.youthbuild.org](http://www.youthbuild.org)

**American Youth Policy Forum** is engaged in an 18-month study of existing opportunities for dropouts to earn educational credentials and skills essential to \ successful entry into further education or the workplace. The study will document successful policies, practices and programs that reconnect dropouts to the education and/or employment preparation systems in their communities. Learn more at: [www.aypf.org](http://www.aypf.org).

**Connect for Kids** is working in partnership with the Youth Transition Funders Group to offer an e-list that offers up-to-date information on the progress of dropout prevention, juvenile justice and foster care. To add your name to the list, contact: [jan@connectforkids.org](mailto:jan@connectforkids.org).

**Jobs for the Future** is working with several partners including the Youth Transition Funders Group, Carnegie Corporation, and the Department of Labor, to document and disseminate efforts to promote alternative pathways and connect out-of-school youth to post-secondary options. JFF is on the web at: [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org).

**National League of Cities** supports municipal leaders and their education advisors in building capacity to address educational issues, through best practices and direct technical assistance around alternative high school pathways. In addition, the Municipal Network on Disconnected Youth provides information on a range of issues and is identifying municipal cross-systems efforts to reengage disconnected youth. For more information, contact: [iyef@nlc.org](mailto:iyef@nlc.org).

**Youth Transition Funders Group**, which includes the Carnegie Corporation, the Gates Foundation, the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, the Meyers Foundation, the Mott Foundation, and the William Penn Foundation, is supporting five cities – Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Portland (OR), and San Jose – in developing systemic approaches to re-enroll dropouts and support struggling students. Learn more at: [www.ytfg.org](http://www.ytfg.org).