

Coalition Supporting Young Adults

# Education Reengagement Solutions Brief September 2022

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A SUMMARY OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY  
LOUISVILLE'S YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS TO HELP LEARNERS  
REACH THEIR EDUCATION GOALS



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## A LETTER FROM CSYA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



September 2022

Dear Reader,

Whether we realize it or not, many of us have a hard time separating a problem or an issue from the person or place experiencing said issue. And whether we mean to or not, many of us, in our need to make sense of a situation, also ascribe the issue or problem to an inherent flaw of the person or place.

This is how people or places become labeled as ‘bad’, or ‘problems’. Many of us do not understand the immense weight and burden we place with these descriptors. Even when we try and help, we often frame the subject around the issue or the problem. This completely erases the dignity and humanity of subject, intentionally or not. This practice has a name, deficit framing.

Many well-meaning and good intentioned people and organizations take this approach. It is the framework most of us view such things through. However, there is an alternative.

According to Trabian Shorters, Asset-Framing is a narrative model that defines people by their assets and aspirations before noting the challenges and deficits. It places the diagnosis and the issue and does not place blame or fault on the person or people.

It is in this tradition that you find this document prepared. The Coalition Supporting Young Adults, in partnership with Kentucky Youth Advocates and The Book Works Project present this Solution Brief, a vibrant and vital report on the barriers that young people face in pursuit of their education. This format is not new, however, we have reimagined it through an asset-based framework. Typically, a report like this is called an issue brief. We decided while the issue is important, that’s not where we wanted to place the onus. What you have the pleasure of having in your hands is a **solutions** brief. In collaboration with the very young people who have faced and grappled with these issues, we not only name the issues, we gave those young people the space to develop solutions and recommendations on how these barriers and problems can be addressed and eventually eradicated.

It is our sincere hope that you leave reading this report inspired and moved to action to take heed to these young people, who are experts of their life experience, and commit to the work of educational advocacy and creating a learning environment that is equitable and conducive for success for all of our young people.

Darryl Young, Jr., Executive Director, CSYA

## ABOUT THIS PROJECT



The Coalition Supporting Young Adults, Kentucky Youth Advocates, and several young adult stakeholders conducted research to better understand factors that lead to educational disengagement in youth and ways to prevent disengagement or to facilitate successful re-engagement. Educational disengagement refers to a situation where a student does not feel included, does not participate in school activities, is not enrolled, or has poor school attendance. For the purposes of our project, educational disengagement included, but was not limited to, dropping out of school, chronic absences, one or more suspensions, being behind on credits, lack of engagement in school activities (such as clubs, sports, other school-related extracurricular activities), or had generally negative feelings towards school, teachers, and staff.

The goals of this Youth-Led Educational Re-Engagement Research (YLERR) project were to identify challenges and solutions and, ultimately, improve meaningful access to supports. To that end, a small cohort of dedicated young adults led this work from start to finish. Utilizing the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) framework, the cohort of young adults informed the survey creation and distribution, facilitated focus groups, analyzed data and determined themes, and researched solution recommendations for policymakers, advocates, and the general community. As a result, these young adults were in a unique position to enhance the work by bringing cultural relevance, fresh perspectives, and the ability to connect with their peers in ways that would not have taken place otherwise.

## SOLUTION 1: ADDRESS STUDENT HOMELESSNESS

All youth and young adults need safe and stable housing. Young people experiencing homelessness lack the stability and security often necessary for academic success. Housing instability creates significant barriers for students, such as frequent school transfers, absenteeism, and a lack of access to educational supports. However, one of the most powerful tools an unhoused student can have against future homelessness is a high school diploma.

A 2018 national study conducted by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found that 1 in 30 kids ages 13-17 years reported experiencing a form of homelessness over the previous 12-month period. That's about 700,000 children. Children often shift among temporary circumstances, such as living on the streets and couch surfing in unstable and unsafe locations. Almost three-quarters of them explicitly reported homelessness (including running away or being kicked out) and one-quarter reported couch surfing only.

According to the JCPS Homeless Education Coordinator, Giselle Danger, **1 in every 20 students in Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) is homeless or face housing insecurity each year.** Last year, that number equated to 5,172 students, but district officials believe that number is actually much higher. *“This number does not really give you a good idea of the dimension and the scope of the situation that we are experiencing in our city because our data depends on families that are willing to share with us their housing situation. And sometimes that topic is very difficult for families to share.”*

Homelessness wreaks havoc in the lives of children. Youth who experience homelessness are at high risk of exposure to a range of physical and mental health problems, violence, early pregnancy, substance use, and early death. These problems naturally impede and impact graduation rates. Specifically, academic success is undermined by poor attendance, inability to complete schoolwork, and a self-reported feeling of never truly belonging to the school community.

There is a strong prevalence and correlation of homelessness and students from marginalized groups. Nationally, Black youth are especially overrepresented, with an 83% increased risk of having experienced homelessness over youth of other races. Hispanic youth are also found at higher risk of experiencing homelessness than non-Hispanic youth. Additionally, LGBTQ youth had a 120% increased risk of experiencing homelessness compared to youth who identified as heterosexual and cisgender.

### Celebrating Successes

- **JCPS Student Equity and Community Engagement Program** coordinates resources and services for homeless students living in any temporary living arrangements because of the lack of a fixed, regular, and adequate residence and to foster a climate where each student is positively received and not stigmatized or isolated.

- **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act Grant** was awarded to Jefferson County Public Schools for the 2021-2024 grant period. McKinney-Vento funds may be used for college applications, tests and exams, clothing, tutoring, supplemental services, enrichment services, evaluation of strengths and needs of homeless children, professional development, provision of referral services for medical, dental, mental, and other health services, transportation costs, programs to retain homeless children in public schools, mentoring, homework assistance, costs for obtaining records, and education and training to parents about rights and resources.

## Youth-Identified Solutions

- **Fund housing interventions that scale in accordance with the scope of youth homelessness.** Youth homelessness is an often broad and hidden challenge. As national- and community-level research continues to clarify the scope of the issue, we can ensure that appropriate funds are allocated to not only address the need but to also continue to periodically conduct research around prevalence.
- **Identify students in need and provide services and prevention efforts that reflect the fluidity of circumstances experienced by homeless youth.** No two cases of youth homelessness are the same. Each student experiencing homelessness or housing instability has unique circumstances and needs. Given this variability, early identification of at-risk students and providing quality interventions that are tailored to their needs is essential. This includes continuing to make investments in and build out our community and district-wide responses to youth homelessness, so that each young person in need is able to be served in an individualized way.
- **Establish and strengthen prevention programs while children are in the state’s care and custody** and develop such programs within key systems that are already serving youth and families, such as schools, juvenile justice, and child welfare systems. Research shows that young people who have been involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems are at a heightened risk of experiencing homeless. These systems can more intentionally assess for risk among students and proactively initiate service referrals.
- **Improve strategies to address the disproportionate risk for homelessness among marginalized and at-risk students.** This begins with properly monitoring prevalence and outcomes of homelessness among minority populations in our communities and state. By continuously monitoring impact, systems and programs will be better equipped to assess the quality of prevention and intervention service delivery to targeted populations. One tangible solution is to create safe and stable housing opportunities specifically for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, with an emphasis on serving populations that are at higher risk, such as LGBTQ, pregnant and parenting, Black, and Hispanic young people.
- **Create sustainable coalitions among families, students, teachers, school based homeless liaisons, advocates, local governments, and policymakers.** Louisville is fortunate to have the Coalition for the Homeless to educate, advocate, and coordinate such efforts in our communities. The Coalition, made up of over 30 local partner organizations that directly serve

youth and adults experiencing homelessness, strategically evaluates the needs in our community and implements smart, long-term solutions. In order for our community to effectively address youth homelessness, however, we must engage more than just those directly serving or impacted by youth homelessness to be a part of the solution.

**JCPS Data**

The *McKinney-Vento Act* defines unaccompanied youth as “a homeless child or youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.” In Jefferson County Public Schools, the number of homeless and unaccompanied homeless high school students is concerning and likely a considerable undercount:

	<b>Homeless High School Students</b>	<b>Homeless HS and Unaccompanied</b>
2019-20	1338	258
2020-21	802	151
2021-22	pending	338

## SOLUTION 2: INCREASE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

Students' unmet mental health challenges can be a significant barrier to their educational success. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other various life stressors, youth today face significant challenges related to their mental health and well-being. When left unaddressed, mental health challenges can have a negative impact on multiple outcomes in a child's life, such as peer relationships, learning, academic achievement, educational attainment, and future career opportunities.

According to the YLERR, 71.4% of surveyed youth and young adults reported anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns as a barrier to their educational engagement. When asked about the kinds of support/services that would have been helpful to receive while in school, respondents mentioned more accessible mental/behavioral health supports. A similar project conducted in 2021 focused on access to and utilization of mental health supports among youth and young adults in Louisville. In the survey, 63% of surveyed young people said they are currently or had previously utilized mental or behavioral health services. Of the respondents that had previously accessed mental health supports, only 60% felt supports were of high or very high quality. There are many barriers to youth accessing mental/behavioral health services. Some of the top barriers identified in the survey included affordability (61%), stigma (61%), a lack of confidence that the issue would be taken seriously (58%), and transportation (55%).

According to results of the Kentucky Incentives for Prevention (KIP) survey administered to JCPS students in 2018:

- 47.4% of 12th grade female students and 35.4% of 12th grade male students reported frequent psychological distress symptoms in the past 30 days, such as being nervous, hopeless, restless or fidgety; so depressed that nothing could cheer them up; feeling that everything was an effort; or feeling worthless.
- 29.7% of 12th grade female students and 16.0% of 12th grade male students reported self-harm or suicidal thoughts or behaviors in the past 12 months.

The KIP survey was administered again in October 2021, however, Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) chose not to participate.

### Celebrating Successes

- In 2019, the Kentucky General Assembly passed and the Governor signed into law the [School Safety and Resiliency Act](#) which requires school districts, as funding is available, to increase access to school counselors by having at least one at each school, having one per every 250 students, and having the time focused on direct services to students. Additionally, [Senate Bill 8 of 2020](#) broadened the definition to include school-based mental health providers.

- In February 2019, JCPS approved approximately \$3M in funding to ensure student access to mental health practitioners. Currently, JCPS boasts at least one mental health coordinator in each JCPS school.
- Free community mental health and counseling services have been established throughout Louisville, including TAYLRD, which serves 16-25 year olds, the Collective Care Center at Spalding University, which offers counseling services for race-based trauma and stress, and Cardinal Success at the Nia Center, which brings access to quality counseling and psychology services to residents from a traditionally underserved area of the community.
- [Senate Bill 102](#) was passed and signed by Governor Beshear during the 2022 Kentucky General Assembly. This piece of legislation continues the good work of the School Safety and Resiliency Act by requiring schools to provide a yearly census of school-based mental health providers to determine if the ratios of providers to students is meeting the mark.
- [House Bill 44](#) was passed and signed by Governor Beshear during the 2022 Kentucky General Assembly and provides the opportunity for local school districts to include provisions in their attendance policies for excused absences due to a student’s mental or behavioral health status.
- Funding was included in the 2022 Kentucky state budget to ensure implementation of the 988 crisis line, which provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for the general public, and best practices for professionals in the United States.

## Youth-Identified Solutions

- **Provide Youth Mental Health First Aid training for parents/caregivers, family members, and friends** to learn how to help an adolescent who is experiencing a mental health challenge or crisis. Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) is a training program designed to teach parents/caregivers, family members, teachers/school staff, peers, and community members how to help an adolescent (ages 12-18) who is experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge or is in crisis. The course introduces common mental health challenges for youth, reviews typical adolescent development, and teaches a 5-step action plan for how to help young people in both crisis and non-crisis situations. Recent research indicates that parents and caregivers who complete the course experienced a significant increase in mental health literacy, help-seeking intentions, attitudes toward help-seeking, behavioral intentions to use the 5-step action planning process, and confidence in YMHFA skills.
- **Create a community-based peer support network that is led and informed by young people.** In the 2021 project conducted by CSYA, KYA, and young adults, respondents overwhelmingly discussed the desire for youth-led peer support programming. In behavioral health, a peer refers to someone with experience living with a psychiatric or substance use disorder. Peer support offers emotional support, sharing of knowledge and education, teaching skills and strategies, and connecting people to resources. A community-based peer support network that is led and

informed by young people would require community support to operationalize and fund programming.

- **Increase social emotional learning opportunities in the classroom.** Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a methodology that helps students of all ages better understand and process their emotions, empathize with others, and, ultimately, strengthen their relationships with adults and peers. The five core components of SEL - self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and making responsible decisions - can be woven through all school curriculum to make lessons more relatable and personal to students. Comprehensive and evidence-based SEL also exists for all grade levels to provide positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes for students.
- **Ensure and fund a ratio of 1 mental health provider per every 250 students to ensure all students have reasonable access to a provider.** The need for mental health support has increased significantly due to pandemic-related challenges and concerns. Include current ratio within JCPS. State-wide and district-wide investments to hire enough mental health practitioners would ensure that students are able to access much-needed support.
- **Increase funding for school-based behavioral health services.** In 2020, the Kentucky General Assembly funded school-based mental health service providers in all 171 school districts. While this funding was an important catalyst, schools have since experienced increased rates of student utilization of school-based mental health services due to the pandemic-related difficulties of the past two years. Kentucky lawmakers can increase funding to attract and hire more qualified professionals that can provide services where kids are already located: their schools. Additionally, we can utilize the expanded care policy, enacted through the 2019 School Safety and Resiliency Act, to allow Kentucky school districts to utilize Medicaid funding to provide eligible students with increased access to school-based health services, including but not limited to behavioral health screenings and/or counseling.

## SOLUTION 3: CONNECT YOUTH WITH ADULTS FOR GUIDANCE AND LIFE SKILLS

Lack of support from teachers or adults in the school was the most frequently mentioned barrier or challenge described by young people participating in the YLERR project. “When I started missing school a lot, no one checked in on me. It was like it didn’t matter when I stopped going.” YLERR Participant

Young people responding to Louisville’s YLERR and national level research like America’s Promise project *Don’t Call Them Dropouts* agree, the presence or absence of positive peer and adult relationships make a big difference in their school success. Knowing someone cares about them as individuals and believes they can graduate was instrumental for many of the young people who shared their experiences. For students who returned to school, many report a trusted adult asked them to consider re-enrolling.

However, for young people who experience complex or ongoing challenges, caring adults need to do more than say they want them to succeed. Young people are asking adults to help them solve problems that get in the way of their goals in school and in life. They seek relationships with adults willing to get to know them as individuals with unique needs and abilities and able to help them identify options that work for them. As described by young people, this means spending time with adults who respect their goals and provide guidance, not judgment, as they practice real-world skills that are important to them.

A 2014 report from America’s Promise, *Don’t Call Them Dropouts*, details the high school experiences of young people who graduated, left before graduating and returned, and have not completed high school. Their comprehensive, nation-wide survey results illustrate the importance of salient connections with adults.<sup>1</sup>

- High school age learners who reported they had a teacher who cared about them were 45% less likely to leave school.
- High school age learners participating in afterschool activities led by adults skilled in youth development were 67% less likely to leave school prior to graduation.
- Youth who reported having teachers who they believed were encouraging them to drop out were less likely to graduate.
- 41% of students who have re-enrolled in school indicate “someone encouraged me” as an important factor in their return.

### Celebrating Successes

- **Junior Achievement:** YLEER participants mentioned participating in JA more than any other in-school program as an example of adult mentoring that taught relevant skills. In JCPS, JA’s high school programs are assisting students to learn financial management skills, explore careers, and develop workplace skills. In three local high schools, the JA 3DE program guides students through projects with local businesses giving learners real-world skills relating to their career interests.

- **Big Brother Big Sister:** Through the BBBS School to Work and School-based Mentoring programs, high school students connect one-on-one with corporate mentors to learn workplace skills, explore careers, and find academic supports.
- **JCPS Youth Service Centers:** Located in high schools throughout the community, the goal of Youth Service Centers is to remove non-academic barriers to learning, to graduation, and to transition to adult life. Each center offers a unique blend of programs and services to meet the needs of the population being served and available resources.
- **JCPS REACH Corps:** An AmeriCorps Program sponsored by JCPS, this in-school program is designed to increase high school graduation rates, enhance student achievement, and raise the attendance rates in our schools. REACH Corps members use Check and Connect, an effective research-based mentoring program. In 24 schools throughout the District, AmeriCorps member are assigned 25 students who have missed 7 to 15 unexcused days of school the previous year.
- **JCPS Student Support Services:** A dropout prevention program for targeted students with low attendance, staff work with students to increase self-esteem, raise academic performance, encourage parent involvement, promote life skills, and improve student attendance. Home School Coordinators (HSCs) are located in 13 high schools and 1 middle school and each work with 80 disengaged/truant students who are showing signs of dropping out of school. The HSCs' goals are to develop authentic relationships and then to coach students to graduate prepared, empowered, and inspired to reach their full potential.

## Youth-Identified Solutions

Everyone in a young person's life and throughout the community can support young people with the tangible support they seek. Teachers, school administrators, bus drivers, clergy, program leaders, parents and grandparents, neighbors, and employers can make a difference by listening to what young people are experiencing in and outside of school and connecting them with useful resources.

The solutions young people identified:

- Expand mentorship programs within schools and the community that match students and mentors based on values and interests.
- Train all teachers and staff in trauma-informed practices.
- Increase opportunities for learning relevant life skills during the school day.
- Create opportunities for students to develop positive peer-to-peer relationships.
- Prioritize effective, holistic bullying prevention efforts in schools and community programs.

## SOLUTION 4: PROVIDE ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Public schools have struggled for decades to provide equitable access to education so that all learners can graduate with the academic skills they need. Students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, students experiencing homelessness, and children and youth in foster care continue to graduate at lower rates and to perform at lower academic levels than students who are not experiencing these challenges. The public health, economic, and social justice crises of the last two years have increased awareness of these disparities and amplified calls for extensive academic support for disenfranchised students.

The Kentucky Department of Education School Report Card details the percentage of high school students who score “proficient” or “distinguished” in reading. These data from the 2018-19 school year (most recent data available due to the pandemic) highlights the need for expanding academic supports for students experiencing social, economic, and health challenges.

- Non-economically disadvantaged students: 53.8%
- White students: 52.6%
- **All students: 37.2%**
- Economically disadvantaged students: 25.2%
- Black students: 20.2%
- Students in foster care: 20.0%
- Students experiencing homelessness: 15.3%

The U.S. Department of Education is encouraging school districts to use American Rescue Plan funds to address learning loss and accelerate student learning, focusing particularly on students who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and social or economic marginalization. The DOE recommends four evidence-based strategies to help students catch up academically:

- In-school acceleration
- High-quality tutoring
- Programs offered outside of school hours
- Summer learning and enrichment (West Ed)

Additional guidance from the DOE suggests students are more likely to reengage with school if the coursework connects with students’ options after high school. Curricula and academic programs that are clearly connected to a career pathway or postsecondary education have been effective in keeping students focused and prepared for life after high school. As many young people described in the YLERR focus groups, they wish they could have had classes that were academically challenging, taught by teachers who expected them to succeed, with content relevant to their future.

## Celebrating Successes

- **CSYA Education Reengagement Hubs:** The Coalition Supporting Young Adults Education Reengagement Hubs are a one-stop shop for services and programs available to Louisville's youth and young adults (ages 16-24) who are not in school, want to find a career, or simply need support. Young people can meet with school counselors and education advocates for help finding a path to a high school diploma, GED, or post-secondary education. They can also connect with service navigators for individual assistance and tutors for academic help.
- **Academies of Louisville:** JCPS offers a variety of career tracks within fifteen of Louisville's public high schools. Each career track includes relevant courses, hands-on learning, industry certifications, and workplace experiences. By connecting high school students with business and community partners, Academy programs prepare young people for college and career success.
- **Goodwill Excel Center:** The first Excel Center in Kentucky will open this fall to offer adults the opportunity to earn a high school diploma tuition-free. The Excel Center assists learners (at least 18 years of age) who want to finish high school and may need access to transportation assistance, childcare and flexible class schedules.
- **JCPS Pathfinder School of Innovation:** This school offers virtual courses to middle and high school students who want to accelerate or make-up courses needed for graduation. Students receive on-demand instruction with live support and intensive progress monitoring.
- **Elev8 Learning Center:** Targeted support and increased learning time for students 3rd – 12th grade. The center is staffed by retired teachers offering additional instruction, targeted tutoring, college and career support and enrichment opportunities to make learning fun and exciting. In addition, students can take part in activities related to STEAM – science, technology, engineering, the arts, and math.

## Youth-Identified Solutions

No-cost homework help, tutoring, study skills workshops, credit-recovery options, and other academic supports are often difficult for high school age students to find in Louisville. The pandemic has increased funding for these supports. The young people we talked with had suggestions on how these resources should be invested:

- Create opportunities for high school students to get free tutoring in school and in the community.
- Increase the different ways high school students can make up or accelerating credits needed for graduation.
- Provide more alternative pathways to earn a diploma.

## SUPPORTING RE-ENGAGEMENT: A ROLE FOR EVERYONE

What can be done by these entities on these issues?	Mental Health	Homelessness	Adults for Guidance and Life Skills	Academic Support
<b>Students and Families</b>	Youth Mental Health First Aid training for parents/caregivers, family members, and friends to learn how to help an adolescent who is experiencing a mental health challenge or crisis.		Get to know teachers and school counselors. Connect with community organizations offering free resources.	Ask for support to enroll in the school, program, and courses that best fit student's learning needs. Request special education services for more support.
<b>Community Members</b>	Create a community-based peer support network that is led and informed by young people.	Create sustainable coalitions among families, students, teachers, school-based homeless liaisons, community advocates, local governments, and policymakers.	Volunteer for a mentor program, offer encouragement to extended family and neighbors	Volunteer to tutor high school age learners. Donate school supplies.
<b>Employers, business leaders</b>			Teach a life skill in school or community site. Ask young employees about their career goals and offer opportunities to learn new skills. Offer worksite tours to introduce career pathways.	Sponsor an academic-related extracurricular team. Give high school age employees incentives to reach academic goals. Give high school students a work schedule that supports school attendance.
<b>Schools</b>	Increase social emotional learning (SEL) opportunities in the classroom; ensure a ratio of 1 mental health provider per every 250 students to ensure all students have reasonable access to a provider.	Identify students in need and provide services and prevention efforts that reflect the fluidity of circumstances experienced by homeless youth.	Offer elective courses on life skills. Include real-world applications in core content classes. Require trauma-informed training for all teachers and staff. Promote positive peer-to-peer interactions and address bullying proactively.	Create alternative pathways to a diploma. Offer more opportunities for credit recovery.

<b>What can be done by these entities on these issues?</b>	<b>Mental Health</b>	<b>Homelessness</b>	<b>Adults for Guidance and Life Skills</b>	<b>Academic Support</b>
<b>Nonprofit Organizations</b>			Offer mentoring and life skills programs for high school students	Offer tutoring and study skills to high school students
<b>Child welfare and justice systems</b>		Establish and strengthen prevention programs while children are in our care and custody.	Link youth with mentors and advocates. Offer opportunities to learn life skills.	Prioritize the education needs of students in all decisions. Enroll students without delay into least restrictive school. Provide tutoring support to make up missed content.
<b>Local and state leaders</b>	Increase funding for school-based behavioral health services.	Improve strategies to address the disproportionate risk for homelessness among marginalized and at-risk students: pregnant and parenting, African American, and LGBT. Expand Mayors for Guaranteed Income Pilot.	Create opportunities for public service employees to mentor and teach life skills to high school age learners.	Integrate training in education advocacy for foster parents, court staff, social workers, and other adults working with high school age learners experiencing disruptions to their education.
<b>Funders</b>		Fund housing interventions that scale in accordance with the scope of youth homelessness.	Expand financial literacy programs.	Fund in school and afterschool programs for high school age youth who are behind academically. Fund a "community school" model that integrates real-world academic skills with access to employment, mental health, transportation and other supports.

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