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Center for  
Promise  
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# MORE THAN A VILLAGE

Perspectives on  
Re-engagement in Tucson

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“ Because sometimes, the food in your mouth is more important than coming to school, or you need to work a job because your family’s not able to provide whatever it is that you need, or being embarrassed because you are not able to have clean clothes. Because some kids aren’t able to have washer and dryers or laundry detergent. They can’t afford certain stuff like that. I know for a fact that I went to school a lot of the time for food. I know that there was food there, so might as well just go. Sometimes you’ve gotta step up. There’s just a lot of things that kids go through. You’ve got to understand.” Sophia\*

“ Yeah, mainly just a solid place to stay, like knowing where I’m gonna take a shower next or have my next meal.... And that’s I kinda love about this school, because when I’d stay for after-school activities, they’d have some dinner, and that’s like another lunch, so I’d get like two or three of those and just eat them. And then not only that, I could come early in the morning. That’s what made me love to run, because one of my ... the coaches down here, his name is Mr. Ross, he’s a lifeguard teacher, and that’s how I got a job life-guarding. And he’d let me in the locker room after I’d run, and say, “Yeah, go ahead and take a shower, and maybe shower, change up, get ready for class.” And that was so great, because ... like, almost for a steady schedule once a month or a week, I’d just come run, take a shower, eat, and that was ... It made my day so less stressful, more focused on my education, get that kind of tiredness, that sadness, run out and wash it off.” Robin

“ A lot of the teachers just kind of are stuck in their own world, and they just go through so many kids, they’re just like, “It’s another day, another kid.” They’ve got to look at each as an individual, because everyone’s a different person.” Jordan

“ But when you go to those alternative high schools, you really limit yourself because yeah, you can do it online all you want, but when you have dyslexia, staring at a screen is not something that’s ideal. And especially when you have ADHD. Sitting down, staring at a screen for all of your classes, that’s not something that’s ideal at all.” Amelia

“ Pretty much all the dropout prevention. They are the most incredible women. I don’t know what it is about them but these three women are like ... I don’t know what the perfect word for them is, like the power goddesses of the school. Seriously, they are the power sources for the school when it comes to saving the kids...” Jocelyn

# INTRODUCTION

Relationships matter. What seems to be a simple truth continues to present a challenge—and significant opportunity—for those who work with youth. Research has repeatedly shown that positive relationships are an important catalyst for success, but often there’s a gap between the relationships young people say they need and the relationships that are available to them.<sup>1</sup> As many communities and schools are actively trying to re-engage young people who have left school, these relationships, both in and out of school, assume a greater importance. To date, however, relatively little research has focused on the caring adults in the re-engagement context.

In January, the Center for Promise released *I’m Going Back*, in which Tucson youth shared their re-engagement stories. They spoke about the central role that caring and supportive relationships play in their lives. As a companion to this study, the Center for Promise sought the perspective of adults who work with these youth. Together, these perspectives can help program designers and managers cultivate a more complete understanding of how re-engagement efforts are designed, implemented, and experienced.<sup>2</sup>

Through interviews with fourteen adults focused on re-engagement across Tucson, the authors found that they share commonalities in how they approach their work:

- **Relationships come first.** Building relationships with young people comes first to establish trust and a better understanding of the young people’s needs.
- **“It takes more than a village.”** Working to address young people’s complex needs on a daily basis often requires connecting young people to additional supports in the community or showing them how to access these supports for themselves and their families.
- **Enhanced collaboration accelerates positive policy change.** By working together—and consulting with youth themselves—youth-serving entities have been able to address youth needs on a citywide basis (eg: obtaining a grant to enable the schools to offer nightly dinners for youth) or change policies (eg: School Justice Partnership Project).



## ***I'M GOING BACK:*** **THE RE-ENGAGEMENT** **EXPERIENCES OF TUCSON YOUTH**

In the first report in this series, *I’m Going Back: The Re-engagement Experiences of Tucson Youth*, Center for Promise researchers spoke with youth about the multiple barriers and factors in their lives that contributed to their decisions either to leave or to persist through high school. One of the primary themes of those interviews was that youth who leave school often have a deep desire to graduate, but they are confronted with overwhelming in- and out-of-school challenges, including familial instability, financial constraints, and inflexible scheduling. In order to successfully navigate those challenges, youth who leave school sometimes require significant assistance from adults to support their educational persistence.

To download *I’m Going Back*, visit [www.americaspromise.org/report/im-going-back-re-engagement-experiences-tucson-youth](http://www.americaspromise.org/report/im-going-back-re-engagement-experiences-tucson-youth)

## BACKGROUND

Despite recent increases in high school graduation rates, too many students still leave school without earning a diploma. The consequences of leaving school without a degree are significant both for the students themselves and for society as a whole. Earning a high school credential is a powerful predictor of positive future outcomes. Compared with their peers, students who have attained a high school diploma have dramatically higher lifetime earnings,<sup>3</sup> are less likely to be incarcerated,<sup>4</sup> have less reliance on public assistance,<sup>5</sup> and have better health outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Previous research with adults suggests that when young people experience those adults as trustworthy, their interactions are perceived as mutually respectful and trusting. Further, multiple adults in a young person's life may provide overlapping supports.<sup>7</sup> To better understand how to foster such relationships or environments where these relationships can flourish, there is a need to better understand the perspective of caring adults that work directly with young people from the adults themselves, including what types of support they offer, what challenges they face, and what systems or structures could help their work.

## Re-engagement efforts in Tucson

Among the multitude of re-engagement options described in *I'm Going Back* are two major prevention and re-engagement efforts in Tucson: the Dropout Prevention Office within Tucson Unified School District and *Youth on the Rise*—a collaboration focused on improving outcomes for opportunity youth. Individuals in both efforts have worked intentionally over the past several years to help reduce Tucson's dropout rate and support more young people in their re-engagement.

### Tucson Unified School District Dropout Prevention Team

The Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) Dropout Prevention Team consists of one Dropout Prevention Coordinator and nine Dropout Prevention Specialists who oversee regional zones within the district. Their caseload varies day-to-day, but they estimate they served 5,796 young people in 2017-2018<sup>A</sup> across elementary, K-8, middle, and high schools. The Dropout Prevention Team provides the most intense and personalized intervention for youth identified as being at risk of school failure within TUSD. Students connect to the TUSD Dropout Prevention Team by referral or by being identified through bi-weekly attendance monitoring (e.g., when students miss three consecutive days of school), teacher referrals, parent referrals, and/or peer referrals. Additionally, young people can seek assistance from the dropout prevention office staff or be identified by dropout prevention specialists before a formal referral is initiated. After a youth is identified as *at-risk* for interrupting their education, the dropout prevention team engages in formalized follow up, including phone calls, letters, home visits, meetings with students, and family outreach.

For more information on Tucson Unified School District's Dropout Prevention efforts see [www.tusd1.org/Departments/Dropout-Prevention](http://www.tusd1.org/Departments/Dropout-Prevention).

### Cradle to Career Partnership—Youth on the Rise

The Cradle to Career Partnership (C2C), a collective impact<sup>B</sup> initiative in Pima County founded in 2015, has set a mission of preparing every young person growing up in Pima County with the supports and skills needed for healthy development and success in school and life. The C2C, organized by United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona, is affiliated with national collective impact efforts, including both the StriveTogether network and Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions.

A For more information contact the TUSD Dropout Prevention office.

B Collective impact refers to strategies to build system capacity and leverage all assets in a community around common goals (e.g., re-engagement) through aligning resources, information sharing, and efforts across sectors (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Nested within C2C, Youth on the Rise (YOTR) focuses on supporting positive educational, career, and life outcomes for opportunity youth—those aged 16-24 who are not in school and not working due to economic, social, and educational barriers—across Pima County. The staffing structure of YOTR consists of two co-chairs, one and a half support staff, and 35 member organizations spanning multiple contexts (e.g., housing assistance, juvenile justice, job preparation). The network focuses on facilitating a more connected system of resources in an effort to support the needs of opportunity youth in Tucson, and throughout Pima County.

For more information see [www.c2cpima.org](http://www.c2cpima.org), [aspencommunitysolutions.org/opportunity-youth-forum](http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/opportunity-youth-forum) or [www.strivetogether.org](http://www.strivetogether.org).

## STUDY DESIGN

The Center for Promise conducted interviews with key members of TUSD and Youth on the Rise. In total, the team conducted 14 individual interviews, six with members of the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) Dropout Prevention Team and eight with adults from Youth on the Rise. Each interview, on average, lasted approximately 30 minutes.

The Center for Promise studied the experiences and perspectives of direct service providers in Tucson, Arizona to understand:

- What re-engagement options are available for young people in Tucson?
- What does it take to help a young person re-engage?
- What do they recommend to encourage more school persistence and completion?

Organization Represented	Affiliation
Tucson Unified School District	Dropout Prevention Team (6)
United Way (2)	Youth on the Rise
Pima County Youth Services	Youth on the Rise
Goodwill Industries	Youth on the Rise
University of Arizona—Fostering Success	Youth on the Rise
Pima County Juvenile Court Center in Tucson	Youth on the Rise
Arizona Serve of Prescott College—AmeriCorps State	Youth on the Rise
Youth on their Own (YOTO)	Youth on the Rise

Importantly, the adults interviewed do not represent all the organizations in Tucson working on re-engagement nor do the adults necessarily represent the views of all adults in their respective organizations. However, all of the adults interviewed have direct exposure to youth in their current roles, have worked with youth in previous roles, and can provide a perspective of what it takes to help young people to and through graduation.

Several of these organizations are also active with Community Schools, an initiative of Tucson Mayor Jonathan Rothschild’s office that places AmeriCorps VISTA members in high schools and middle schools, as well as with partner organizations, to connect students and their families with wraparound services. The goal of this effort, which is funded by the Corporation for National & Community Service and administered by Arizona Serve, is to increase graduation rates.

# FINDINGS

The adults interviewed identified the same needs and barriers to re-engagement that the young people reported in *I'm Going Back*, such as familial instability, financial constraints, inflexible scheduling, and an unwelcoming school climate, indicating alignment and shared knowledge. In addition, they expanded on the youth perspectives by describing what resources they draw from to support youth, the process of coordinating additional supports for young people, and ideas to strengthen their efforts. Ultimately, the authors found that when adults and youth agree on barriers, progress towards removing those barriers is made. After analyzing the interviews, the authors find that adults working on re-engagement in Tucson share commonalities in how they approach their work with young people:

- **Relationships come first.** Building relationships with young people comes first to establish trust and a better understanding of the young people's needs.
- **"It takes more than a village."** Working to address young people's complex needs on a daily basis often requires connecting young people to additional supports in the community or showing them how to access these supports for themselves and their families.
- **Enhanced collaboration accelerates positive policy change.** By working together—and consulting with youth themselves—youth-serving entities have been able to address youth needs on a citywide basis (eg: obtaining a grant to enable the schools to offer nightly dinners for youth) or change policies (eg: School Justice Partnership Project).

## Relationships come first

Despite working in a variety of roles and for different organizations, all of the interviewed adults recognize that building and maintaining relationships characterized by trust, care, and connectedness are foundational to supporting young people who have disengaged from school.

“The purpose of the Dropout Prevention Team is to give the kids another voice and be an advocate for things that most kids are maybe shy or embarrassed to speak about in front of administrators at their high schools or even their own teachers. We get to build relationships and trust with these kids. We're on their team and we're here to help them. With that being said, we build those bonds. Once those bonds are built, we can go into the schools and advocate for these kids and say, “Hey! You know this young lady here, she's going through this situation.”

The teacher might say, “Oh! Wow! I didn't even know! How did you know this?” That's where we say, “Well, we've developed a relationship with this kid. Not only the kid, but sometimes we develop relationships with the families because most of the time there's more than one student in the house.”

TUSD Dropout Prevention Team

The dropout prevention team views home visits as essential to building strong, trusting relationships with families, a point also made by the youth who we interviewed. The team conducts home visits as a part of their daily activities and also coordinates *Steps to Success*, a biannual door-knocking effort they lead in partnership with the mayor's office.

“The most [important] thing I think we do, probably, this might be unique to dropout prevention, is our home visits. We've connected with the parents a lot more than most people in the school. I think the home visits piece is, I think, what we do. It's probably the most important part of our re-engagement to the students.”

TUSD Dropout Prevention Team

Several adults both within and outside of TUSD mentioned that building relationships might be even more important for youth who have disengaged from school. These youth may feel as if they have been repeatedly let down by the existing adults in their lives and may find it difficult to trust new adults. One adult, who serves young people in Tucson with the most extreme needs, explains that these youth need adults they can trust, and that such relationships can be sources of accountability that keep the youth on track in their education.

**“I think one of the biggest factors [for re-engaging] that I’ve heard again and again from young people is trust, which I think has to do with building caring relationships with adults, and being able to trust that even adults... [because many young people get into the situation where they meet adults] who are saying they have your interest in mind that aren’t necessarily trustworthy.”**

Youth on the Rise Member

One of the dropout prevention team members explained how their embedded positions in schools enables them to build positive, caring relationships, and support school climates characterized by high levels of connectivity and trust. Below, a dropout prevention team member describes the simple power of knowing student names and details about their personal lives, which has been shown to increase levels of connectedness and trust.<sup>8</sup>

**“And then the opposite end of that is the student that we want to do the intervention on, the student that we really want to prohibit from dropping out. Just by them being on campus, by the dropout specialists being on campus, it is amazing to me how many kids they can sight name. It could be lunch time and there could be 300 kids coming out into a courtyard and they can stand there and say hey to I don’t know, 210. And have their names right. And know some history on them. And once we get out there and these kids realize that we’re truly different human beings. I mean, we’re not your norm. They can trust us. And then word of mouth spreads, and then we get to find it. So, they’ll bring us kids. Or we’ll see kids, we’ll see kids that are for some reason alienated. And we’ll go to them. That kind of thing. Or we’ll get a call from a teacher, an email from a teacher saying, “This kid has missed my 3rd period class. I’ve reached out. I know something’s going wrong in the home. Can you guys try to see what you can do?” And it’s the same scenario. Find out what the kid has to say, let’s see what’s going on, let’s see if there’s community resources that we can hook you up with that will help this. Let’s see what we can do to pull some of these roadblocks back, and to keep you in school.”**

TUSD Dropout Prevention Team

This quote also demonstrates the shared perspective that it takes more than one adult to support youth re-engagement. As a result of this mindset, the interviewed adults work to coordinate services and facilitate connections with a constellation of adults both within school and with service providers in the community.

## It takes more than a village

All of the adults acknowledged that the young people they serve have a multitude of needs and require a diverse array of supports in order to stabilize the youth’s lives and re-engage in education. The adults stressed that meeting those needs is a prerequisite to supporting them in their education or career pathway.

**“... We’ve got to be empathetic to some of their needs. We need to be able to reassure on the spot if we have some kind of a situation that they need help with as far as removing that transportation, housing there, whatever the need may be. I guess what I’m saying is yes, we want them to go to school and that’s our intent. But if we don’t help them with their immediate needs, they’re never going to participate in any type of a program. That’s including education.”**

Youth on the Rise Member

The adults describe supporting young people by providing comprehensive services and supports. For example, adults spoke about supporting youth informationally, teaching them to navigate public systems, such as applying for Medicaid. Often, adults described providing instrumental support, such as getting young people bus passes or helping them rearrange their schedules so they can work while pursuing their education. The adults also describe providing young people validation and affirmation by asking them about their goals and helping the young people to achieve them.

All of the adults leverage relationships and resources within and outside of the district to accomplish the complex task of supporting any young person with whom they engage. A member of the dropout prevention team describes many different community resources their office leverages to support youth as they re-connect and re-engage with their education.



“ We use two or three places where we get diapers from, because ... I mean, kids are having kids all the time. So, like formula and diapers and that kind of thing, we have resources for that. We have resources for tutoring. There’s the Youth On Their Own program here, which literally is servicing those kids [who are unaccompanied]. But if we have kids who get really sick, they will cover the doctor’s costs, or they have doctors that will work for them pro-bono, and we also have St. Elizabeth’s clinic. And St. Elizabeth’s has been really good for dental and medical issues, and even vision. Most of these kids hit AHCCCS, which is the state healthcare. And so, we can help them with that a little bit. We have the Educational Enrichment Foundation, which is solely for TUSD students. But they’ll do things like clothing. They’ll do, like if we need a kid that desperately has to have shoes and have them fast, they’ll do things like that. The food bank. Now, a lot of schools, within the school, have many food banks. And so, we use those like crazy. We have family engagement centers that we didn’t use to have, but we have our own internal clothing bank system. And so, we use that, but we do use other assets in that we use the community food bank as well as our internal food banks. Tons of churches. We have a group called 4Tucson, they came into the schools saying hey, what can we do to help you? And they’re phenomenal. I mean, seriously. They’ve helped clean up schools. They’ve helped un-tag messes. They’ve helped us get furniture for families.”

TUSD Dropout Prevention Team

The Metro/Re-engagement Center (Metro/REC) is a core aspect of the re-engagement work of Youth on the Rise. The Metro/REC offers a multitude of in-house resources and supports for young people including counseling services, assistance navigating public systems, and an online, credit-earning educational option through a partnership with GradSolutions. In addition to in-house supports, it serves as a hub for coordinating services for young people across Tucson. However, because the Metro/REC staff recognizes that the youth may not trust organizations and adults that are new to them, the Metro/REC provides space for youth and providers to meet, facilitating relationship building, and providing greater access to services.

One staff member describes how the Metro/REC conceptualizes re-engagement and organizes their work to meet each individual’s needs.

“ I guess we look at it as based on what the individual needs are. We take pride in just meeting the kids where they’re at, when they come down here. For some, that may be like, “Hey, I’m in need of a housing program. I’m currently couch surfing, or I’ve been kicked out somewhere.” So re-engagement means, to us, that we’re going to connect you back to an organization, or agency, that can help you get into the process of getting housing within the City of Tucson. It could also mean, “Hey, I’m a young person and I’m on juvenile probation, and I haven’t been doing anything productive to meet my probation requirements.” It could be get connected with community service options. It could be giving back to the community somehow. It could be, also, helping young people connect to where they can go and get their health needs met within Tucson. So we do open the space up to providers to come in and engage with the youth, who ... When we normally might refer young people to different partners, or agencies, or organizations, because most every adult in their life have let them down, they’re really leery and hesitant with going to places that they’re not sure about. So we try to invite those providers, those community partners in, so helping somebody get set up with healthcare benefits, or SNAP benefits, food stamps. That could be a form of re-engagement, as well.”

Youth on the Rise Member

Adults throughout the community seem to be seeking out and providing similar services and supports for youth. Adults described being most successful in supporting young people when they were able to leverage resources from partner organizations throughout the community. This happens within organizations in terms of sharing knowledge and resources, but also occurs on a systemic level through creating partnerships in order to be more responsive to the recognized needs of young people.



A leader of a Youth on the Rise member organization describes how staff share information internally:

**“ We, as a program, we communicate with everybody through an app and...Because everybody is on [the app], if somebody needs a job, they’ll just post on our team [chat] and say hey, does anybody know of anybody that’s hiring or I need a cheaper place to live, does anybody know of anything opening up and we’ve had pretty decent support with our students and our student staff to say oh yeah, I saw this thing or I know somebody that works there or I know the manager at that place, let me put in a good word for you. That communal support, these are all the networking opportunities, these are all the resources that I have, and that we have collectively to be able to share very easily. That has really been helpful for I think, a lot of folks.”**

Youth on the Rise Member

Adults within and outside of TUSD continually identify, access, and coordinate supports for the young people they serve. They acknowledge the importance of this work and that to successfully re-engage more young people will require building additional partnerships, strengthening existing ones, and collectively pursuing policy changes.

## Enhanced collaboration accelerates positive policy change

Across the city, adults highlighted successes in their efforts to coordinate support at the school and district levels and to spur policy change based on needs they saw or heard from young people. For example, food insecurity was a recognized need from providers both within TUSD and the community. A recent success in the city is the After School Meals Program, which was started by Community Schools as a pilot at Palo Verde High School and ensures an additional hot meal a day for any young person who walks through the door. The program was so successful that funding was secured to allow it to expand to two other high schools in the district. There were youth interviewed in *I’m Going Back* who mentioned such programs as helpful for adding stability to their lives and helping them focus on school.

**“ One of the things that the school did, and I’m really proud of TUSD for doing this. And you know, it’s federal law, you have to do the breakfast and the lunch. TUSD got a grant, and now they’re feeding dinner at the high schools. And any kid, it doesn’t have to be a TUSD kid, any kid 18 and under can come and get something for dinner at any of the high schools. That alone is enormous. Because you know, they’re not eating.”**

TUSD Dropout Prevention Team

For the adults who work as a part of Youth on the Rise, many of their policy successes came from listening to young people and leveraging partnerships created through the C2C work happening throughout the city. For example, one adult from outside of the district spoke about the success of the school and justice system partnership in changing policies and practice to reduce high suspension and expulsion rates, which can impact school persistence.<sup>9</sup>

**“ We’ve created guidelines for all schools to just review before they consider calling law enforcement. And law enforcement is on board with that. In fact, a lot of the school resource officers within the schools actually tell the schools, ‘you know, I want you to look at the guidelines before you call me. Have you looked at the guidelines and is this an offense that warrants law enforcement involvement?’ So we’ve reduced a lot of school based referrals to law enforcement by utilizing that, which has ultimately reduced suspensions and expulsions. We’ve also created what is called the School Justice Partnership Project. That School Justice Partnership Project is focusing on, again, allowing the school to impose a consequence for an offense and the school making the decision and providing the school with either training on victim advocates or trauma, on what exactly juvenile court does, probation, what warrants detention and what warrants a call to law enforcement and how law enforcement’s going to react. So that way schools can either create teen courts within their schools, create community justice boards within their schools. We also included behavioral health so behavioral health can be in the schools everybody counseling to the kids instead of immediately suspending or expelling.”**

Youth on the Rise Member

These successes were the result of coordinated, city-wide efforts. Importantly, these efforts were informed by data about student needs and experiences. Though the adults interviewed provided several examples of successful policy efforts to address repeated needs they heard from young people, they emphasized the power of listening to youth voice in combination with enhanced collaboration across the city.

“ I would say a significant assist to what direction we’re moving in not only in regards to juvenile court but Youth on the Rise is the youth leadership council. It plays a huge role in identifying what direction we’re heading and what we need to do. We felt that youth’s voice was very important to include in regards to anything and everything that we do in our next steps. So our youth leadership council members are attending almost every one of our United Way Youth on the Rise meetings. And they’re involved in a lot of what they do and a lot of the youth leadership council members are also on our United Youth Leadership Council that we have for juvenile court. So they do have double duty because a lot of them have like crossed over. They’re dependent, they’re delinquency, they’re homeless, they’re foster care youth, you know, things like that. They’re 21 and over, they’re special education, they have mental health needs so they help us in both of those arenas and that has been ... I can’t even measure how helpful that has been in regards to the direction that we’re going and where we’re heading and how intentional we are in what we do.”

Youth on the Rise Member

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Though adults working on re-engagement efforts within and beyond TUSD provided many examples of successful collaboration, they consistently described some limitations and challenges in their work, suggesting opportunities for improvement:

- **Continue to enhance collaboration across the city.** Re-engagement efforts continue to be siloed, despite the various efforts of individuals to coordinate resources and services.
- **Create more accessible, high-quality educational alternatives.** There are not enough alternative education options to serve the wide range of needs of young people in Tucson. Physical and structural barriers prevent youth from accessing alternative more supportive options.
- **Integrate more workforce development opportunities and incentives.** The interviewed adults repeatedly spoke of young people’s desire for career/job readiness training, but additionally witnessed many vocational training programs lose funding.

### Enhance collaboration: Everyone has a role to play

While much of the C2C efforts are related to re-engagement in high school, the interviewed adults felt that the dropout prevention team is undoubtedly on the front lines of school re-engagement, building strong relationships in the name of dropout prevention and re-engagement efforts. However, it is a team of 10 serving a district of over 45,000 (K-12) students. Adults from within and outside of the district spoke repeatedly about the need for more collaboration and resources to bolster dropout prevention efforts.

“ After [a young person has] been away from the system. They’re not engaged in either employment and/or education. It’s tough ... when we get called, it’s basically because they’re struggling. They’re hurting. They need a different alternative. I think that’s something that needs to be worked on, but it’s bigger than us. It’s a system model, a wide issue and it would take multiple disciplines and educational systems, government, private and public, all working on this prevention piece.”

Youth on the Rise Member

This adult, from outside the district, felt more enhanced collaboration between in-district and out-of-district efforts would lead to more young people being matched with educational options that work for them. Indeed, dropout prevention team members felt all adults who interact with youth in educational or re-engagement spaces need to work together and consider they all have a role to play in dropout prevention.

**“It just needs to be, like, everybody needs to come together. That old saying, it takes a village? Well, it takes a lot more than a village. It probably takes a couple countries to make it happen. We need that mentality. We need everybody to realize that dropout is not ‘dropout prevention’s’ problem. It’s everybody’s problem.”**

TUSD Dropout Prevention Team

Ultimately, this adult argued one does not have to be a dropout prevention specialist to build relationships with young people and try to meet their needs to keep them engaged in school. The conversations with youth-serving adults indicates there are many re-engagement allies within Tucson thinking similarly about serving young people with the re-engagement process. They feel that more adults adopting the mindset that everyone has a role to play will result in more prevention efforts, ultimately making re-engagement efforts secondary.

## Create more accessible alternative options

Despite all of the efforts and dedication of adults in Tucson, and their recent successes, nearly all of the adults interviewed felt there were still young people whose needs were not met through the current re-engagement options. For example, adults felt youth who do not learn well on computers, do not have access to transportation, are systems involved, or cannot attend school for the full required time need more creative solutions for re-engagement.

Currently, all alternative education options in the Tucson Unified School District involve online courses, which young people, in *I’m Going Back*, felt was limiting for some students. TUSD Dropout Prevention Team members mentioned how they are guided to only recommend TUSD options and how those options might not be accessible for all young people in Tucson.

**“If I’m not good on the computer, I’m not going to be any good, you know what I mean? Giving me an online class ain’t going to help me graduate, because I’m not good on the computer, and my attention span- that’s what I tell kids all the time too. We need a place. We need actually a building that don’t run like a traditional high school, meaning it don’t have traditional hours. We need something that don’t have traditional hours, and we need it located in the central part of town, or on both sides of town.”**

TUSD Dropout Prevention Team

In interviews, adults frequently recommended providing transportation assistance to students to address one barrier to school attendance. They often spoke about providing bus passes for students to get to school but, in some cases, subsidizing public transportation is not enough. In addition, given some programs require students to have a certain number of credits accumulated to enroll, this TUSD adult spoke about the need for more accessible options for all students, not just those who meet eligibility requirements.

**“The biggest problem for most kids is transportation. Then you’ve got a program only selecting certain kids, meaning if you don’t have x amount of credits, you can’t come in this program. Well, you’re not helping me. I’m trying to get credits, so you got to be open. We need a program that’s open to all freshmen through seniors. We’ve got to have those classes available for these kids to take. We’ve got to have that flexibility for these kids, so if I’m working, or I’m getting off late, can’t come to school early, I need to be able to start later. We don’t have that kind of stuff, and that’s the stuff we need.”**

TUSD Dropout Prevention Team

One adult, outside of TUSD, explained that the current transit system does not connect some of the most vulnerable sections of the city to available resources, making it difficult or impossible for young people to access needed resources, even if they do exist.



“Tucson itself from being a smaller town is very much divided by the west side, midtown, the north side, east side, and so there’s these big pockets of population and it’s not easy to get from one part of town to the other part of town unless you have a car. Our public transit system isn’t very great and a lot of these services are in either midtown or downtown and the people that need them the most live on the outskirts ....there needs to be some accountability from the city and the counties themselves to build a better transit system. There needs to be an ability to get from one side of the town to the other in a safe way; it doesn’t need to take two and a half hours on the bus to go 15 miles. There needs to be a better way; there needs to be a better system because then that prevents young folks from being able to find employability or to go to school because they don’t want to spend two and a half hours on the bus.”

Youth on the Rise Member

Across the city, adults felt significant life transitions, such as changes in the family structure, moving homes, and being involved in the juvenile justice system, often disrupted students’ education. Several adults mentioned the need for a separate school for youth who may be navigating particular life circumstances, such as reentry from incarceration, or need non-traditional hours. One adult brought up a specific example of a transition school being explored by members of the Youth on the Rise collaborative:

“I want to say the one thing that I feel that we are missing is, how do I put this, a school ... what we’re trying to work on is what we call a transition school. And what that means is we have youth who are in detention and are being released from detention and a majority of the time cannot return to their home school or, for that matter, any school for several different reasons. Because they’ve been suspended, expelled, because it’s the middle of the semester or it’s too late in the semester and if they did go to school they wouldn’t earn any credit. Here in Tucson, we are lacking that type of school that is going to allow them to come to school and basically have open enrollment and allow them to attend at any time that they need. We are working on that actually right now. We are working on, in fact we have a meeting on Friday, sitting down with one of the largest school districts, again TUSD, and meeting with their superintendent to discuss the option of a transition school.”

Youth on the Rise Member

The interviewee goes on to say that multiple partners in the C2C partnership are exploring the creation of a transition school in Tucson that will ultimately be open to any student who needs a non-traditional schedule or additional services.

## Integrate opportunities for workforce development and incentives

Adults working in re-engagement highlighted the need to work as a recurring theme in their conversations with young people. The need stems from factors such as familial financial instability and not seeing how school can add to their lives more than income. *I’m Going Back* provides more details on this topic. In order to re-engage young people in their educations, and honor their need and desire for job preparation, interviewees emphasized the need for additional job training experiences and financial incentives that help ease young people’s competing priorities between school and work.

“I think if we had something more like I say they could make beats and play with music or if they could maybe also do sports...We took all the vocational out of schools. I’m sorry there’s an old adage in special ed busy hands are happy hands. I believe that.... we need to be doing constructive things. Things that they could go on Saturday and make legal money. And I think we took all of that away from these kids. Everybody sits in a desk. They all learn the same way. They all learn the same old bullshit. Where if you took half of that bullshit and put it with fun and modern stuff we couldn’t keep them out of our schools. Let them learn to cut hair...I’m saying there are ways to give programs from other kinds of jobs. Where kids make big money today. I really believe we could do so much more if we all put our heads together.”

TUSD Dropout Prevention Team

In the experiences of the adults, offering multiple pathways, including vocational opportunities, would allow young people to see the relevance of their education to current and future professional opportunities.

“People need to be able to feel like they’re actually learning something. So, when you’re doing job training or job readiness in addition to your high school work, it gives them a sense of purpose to say, “This is why me going to math class is important. This is why I need to learn how to read a book and write a report because it’s going to help me in the long run by doing this.” ...So, adding in that ability to have that extra piece is, one, it builds their self confidence and it helped them tremendously put into practice what they’re learning. It also it’s really boosting our economy because now we’re having so many people that are ready to actually enter the workforce in a serious way and so it helps us get families out of poverty.”

Youth on the Rise Member

## CONCLUSION

After speaking to young people in Tucson about their experiences with re-engagement to inform the first publication in this series, *I’m Going Back: The Re-engagement Experiences of Tucson Youth*, the Center for Promise set out to understand what it takes to support young people in Tucson to and through graduation, from the adult perspective. The analysis in this report revealed that the adults in Tucson, despite approaching the work from different positions, have common mindsets and approaches to their work. They are all tenacious, compassionate, thoughtful individuals doing whatever is within their power to support any young person they come across in Tucson. They are doing so in the face of enormous and complex needs and largely without all of the resources necessary to complete the job. This effort is not lost on the young people, as evident in the tone used and the stories they shared when discussing the caring adults in *I’m Going Back: The Re-engagement Experiences of Tucson Youth*.

The adults identified the same needs and barriers to school engagement and persistence as young people in Tucson, but were also able to describe efforts towards creating policy level changes to address some of the needs and barriers they have identified. While the adults are all very proud of their accomplishments thus far, it is clear that more collaboration and communication is needed to prepare young people for high school graduation and a productive postsecondary life. This sentiment once again resonates with findings in *I’m Going Back*; young people continue to face barriers to school completion despite the clear support of adults around them. The adult stories highlight the power of caring adults, a shared mindset, and collaborative efforts to support young people to and through graduation.

# ENDNOTES

- 1 Varga & Zaff, 2018
- 2 Meltzer, Muir, & Craig, 2016
- 3 Belfield, Levin & Rosen, 2012
- 4 Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009
- 5 Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012
- 6 Muennig, Fiscella, Tancredi, & Franks, 2010
- 7 Duke, Farruggia, & Geramo, 2017; Meltzer, Muir, & Craig, 2016; Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005
- 8 Yu, Johnson, Deutsch, & Varga, 2018
- 9 Pufall Jones, et al, 2018

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The Center for Promise is the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance, housed at the Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development and dedicated to understanding what young people need to thrive and how to create the conditions of success for all young people.

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America's America's Promise Alliance is the nation's largest network dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth. We bring together more than 400 national organizations and thousands of community leaders to focus the nation's attention on young people's lives and voices, lead bold campaigns to expand opportunity, conduct groundbreaking research on what young people need to thrive, and accelerate the adoption of strategies that help young people succeed. GradNation, our signature campaign, mobilizes Americans to increase the nation's high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020. In the past 12 years, an additional 2.8 million young people have graduated from high school.

### About the GradNation State Activation Initiative

The GradNation State Activation initiative is a collaboration between America's Promise Alliance and Pearson working to increase high school graduation rates to 90 percent. The three-year initiative focuses on increasing graduation rates by investing in three key things: encouraging statewide innovation and collaboration; sharing that knowledge and replicating what works; and developing successful models all states can replicate. America's Promise Alliance and Pearson have made a \$600,000 investment in grants to bolster organizations with innovative approaches to increase U.S. graduation rates. The grantees, located in Arizona, Massachusetts and Minnesota, have each received a \$200,000 grant and have demonstrated a commitment to preparing more young people with the skills necessary to graduate from high school and succeed in college, work and life. WestEd is the GradNation State Activation initiative grant recipient on behalf of the state of Arizona and is using grant funds to catalyze action to close the achievement gap and reach a 90 percent graduation rate in Arizona by 2020. To learn more, visit [www.AmericasPromise.org](http://www.AmericasPromise.org).

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