



## POLICY BRIEF

**Creating Pathways  
to Success for  
Opportunity  
Youth**  
Lessons from Three  
Massachusetts  
Communities

[www.renniecenter.org](http://www.renniecenter.org)

## A challenge and an opportunity

Today, 6.7 million youth in the United States between the ages of 16 and 24 are neither enrolled in school nor employed.<sup>1</sup> Representing 17 percent of all young people in the age band, this crisis continues to grow as, each year, over one million additional youth become disconnected from the schools and systems intended to prepare them for their future.<sup>2</sup> Educators and youth advocates have dubbed this disconnected population “opportunity youth” to reflect their unrealized potential and the opportunity we have as a society to strengthen communities and boost the economy by ensuring sustainable life success for all young people.

Educators, advocates, and policy leaders agree that improving outcomes of opportunity youth is a social and economic imperative. Once disconnected from education, youth are less likely to find regular employment later in life than their peers and more likely to face greater health problems, depend on government services, and become involved in criminal activity.<sup>3</sup> If current trends persist, only one percent of these opportunity youth will have completed an associate’s degree or bachelor’s degree by age 28, compared to 36 percent of the general population.<sup>4</sup> Economists predict that the total taxpayer and social burden for the current cohort of disconnected youth will amount to \$4.75 trillion over the course of their lifetimes.<sup>5</sup>

The good news is that initiatives that effectively re-engage this population in education and the workforce can have a powerful impact. Programs that improve high school equivalency rates, for example, consistently show a substantial return on investment, with program completers going on to earn higher wages and require fewer public resources.<sup>6</sup> The outcomes are even more positive for high school equivalency completers who go on to pursue postsecondary study.<sup>7</sup>

More can be done. In today’s global economy, high school completion—or equivalency—is an important but insufficient outcome. Some estimate that by 2018 as much as 64 percent of jobs will require more than a high school diploma.<sup>8</sup> Each year of postsecondary education increases the likelihood that an adult will remain employed, earn family-sustaining wages, and have children who are prepared to succeed in school.<sup>9</sup> Policymakers and youth service providers are increasingly setting their sights on career preparation and postsecondary completion as the goal—whether that means training programs, a traditional two- or four-year college degree, or a vocational certificate.

The growing “high school equivalency (HSE)-plus” field is a response to this need. Programs serving opportunity youth are increasingly looking beyond a high school credential as the end goal. They are expanding their mission, seeking to forge new onramps to postsecondary completion and financially sustaining careers, while addressing student non-academic needs that support opportunities for ongoing learning and progression to critical milestones. This work is challenging. Providers already struggle to meet the significant and varied academic, social, and emotional needs of disconnected youth; bridging the gap between a high school credential and postsecondary and career only increases those challenges.

In this policy brief, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy surveyed the latest research on successful HSE-plus programs<sup>A</sup> nationally to better understand this emerging field and assess which approaches show the greatest promise for increasing postsecondary and career achievement among opportunity youth. The Rennie Center then considered Massachusetts' capacity to serve opportunity youth by taking a close look at HSE-plus programs in three communities, examining to what extent local programming reflects best practice, and identifying areas where more capacity must be built. Findings are intended to inform statewide efforts to create stronger pathways to postsecondary success for Massachusetts' large opportunity youth population.

### Study approach

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy conducted a research study to gain understanding of services and programming in Massachusetts providing opportunity youth with pathways to and through high school equivalency (HSE). The study sought clarity about:

- the evidence in research literature about practices present in effective HSE-plus programs;
- the community-level initiatives currently underway in Massachusetts to serve opportunity youth; and
- the capacity for supporting opportunity youth statewide, as represented by three communities.

**Research methods.** This research study was conducted in the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014. The Rennie Center reviewed the body of literature on opportunity youth and HSE-plus programs to understand research findings about youth ages 16–24 who do not have a high school diploma or equivalency and are currently unemployed (or underemployed) and not enrolled in school. This review sought to provide insight into the extent to which pathways for opportunity youth are characterized by common or effective features. Site-based research focused on identifying key practices that define HSE-plus programs was then pursued using established qualitative methodologies. Individual phone interviews with program leaders and key stakeholders in three Massachusetts communities—Greenfield, New Bedford, and the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston—were conducted to understand the extent of opportunity youth programming in selected Massachusetts communities. (For more information on each community, see text boxes on pages 7, 9, and 11.) The interviews focused on program services, characteristics of youth served, youth readiness and support, connection with community resources, and youth pathways to and through high school equivalency. Researchers selected the three communities for participation in the study using information about Adult Basic Education services, high school graduation rates, the rate at which students take a high school equivalency exam, and enrollment in institutes of higher education. See Appendix A for more information about the sample selection process. Interviews were conducted in early 2014 using structured protocols and lasted approximately 60 minutes.

**Limitations.** The data collected in this research study is meant to describe the types of services and programming available to opportunity youth in Massachusetts communities. It is not meant to represent the condition of services available in every community across the state.

A A note about terminology: throughout this document, the term “HSE-plus” is used to denote a program or service that provides academic services in preparation of a high school equivalency exam, as well as other services that support youth to achieve other goals (such as wraparound connections, postsecondary enrollment, or career training). This may have been known as “GED-plus” in the past, in reference to a well-known high school equivalency exam.

## Lessons from the literature

Until now, research on high school equivalency preparation (HSE) preparation programs has focused largely on their economic impact. We know from the evaluations of several large-scale HSE providers that, when disconnected youth complete a high school equivalency and continue to postsecondary education, they enjoy lasting improvements in employment and earnings.<sup>10</sup> The impact appears to be strongest for those who spend more time preparing for the equivalency exam. Low-skilled adults, however, tend to complete these preparation programs in lower numbers.<sup>11</sup> Very little research has been done on the impact of HSE credential attainment on other outcomes, such as long-term health and well-being.<sup>12</sup>

Many opportunity youth who engage in HSE programs do not obtain a credential. The more successful programs boast HSE attainment rates in the range of 42 to 61 percent range, and those with the highest completion rates often attract the least disconnected youth.<sup>13</sup> Still, these completion rates represent a substantial, positive contribution to a large challenge, and we should not discount the knowledge and skills that program non-completers may acquire, the impact of which is difficult to measure.

Given the range of HSE completion rates across providers, we must ask: Which practices lead to better outcomes? How do these practices vary for different populations? And, what additional resources would be needed to reach a more ambitious goal of postsecondary and career transition?

While there is limited empirical evidence about the effectiveness of particular interventions and practices in HSE preparation, and even less research about newer HSE-plus programs, we can draw on a number of program evaluations and qualitative studies that document the designs of well-regarded HSE programs, including those that boast relatively high completion rates. Looking across this literature, four types of support emerge:

- **Academic development:** The curriculum and instructional practices that support students to master high school equivalency standards and prepare for further education.
- **Wraparound support:** The array of services that help students address basic needs and achieve a level of social and emotional well-being that makes learning possible.
- **Career preparation:** Services that provide career exposure, work experience, job-readiness training, and job placement support.
- **Postsecondary transitions:** Supports that prepare students for postsecondary learning environments, support them to apply and enroll, and helped them persist to a degree or certificate.

In this section, the Rennie Center presents key themes that emerge in each of these four areas, and Figure 2 (see page 5) provides more specificity about the practices, structures, and service models that appear to be most common in each area. Not every program must (or could) incorporate every practice listed here, but successful programs attend to all four areas either in-house or through community networks.

## Opportunity youth require diverse, often complex, supports

The first lesson that emerges from the research is that opportunity youth are not all the same. For most, the factors that caused their initial disconnection remain impediments to learning. Opportunity youth are more likely than their peers to have been raised in or near poverty, and they are more likely to be English language learners, high school dropouts, court involved, and homeless or in foster care.<sup>14</sup> They are also more likely to be young parents, military veterans, and struggle with diagnosed or undiagnosed learning needs, various forms of trauma, and other social, emotional, or behavioral challenges.<sup>15</sup> They are at heightened risk for further disconnection through incarceration, which can exacerbate anti-social behaviors and limit school and work opportunities, and early parenting, which increases financial vulnerability and constricts education and work options.<sup>16</sup> Older youth, aged 19-24, are especially vulnerable, as they are likely to have been disconnected from education for a longer duration. The learning needs of many are profound, as are the factors that must be attenuated to make learning possible.

By all accounts, opportunity youth across the United States are largely non-white, and have diverse cultural experiences.<sup>18</sup> (See Figure 1 at the top of the next page.) Notably, a greater proportion of minority women are disconnected than any other subgroup of opportunity youth.<sup>19</sup> Yet, there is limited research on the role of race and cultural background in high quality

HSE-plus programs. This may change: a growing body of evidence stipulates that a holistic approach to addressing the multiple needs of youth—with a focus on the role of race and community—is the most effective in supporting youth to complete a credential.<sup>20</sup> Further research is needed to determine whether opportunity youth of color have access to culturally-sensitive supports that lead to success in HSE-plus programs.<sup>21</sup>

Given the diversity of factors in place, a one-size-fits-all approach does not work in HSE-plus programs. A young person’s likelihood of continuing to a credential is influenced by the age and education stage at which he/she first became disconnected, as well as the impact particular life circumstances have had on his/her development.<sup>22</sup> A 24-year old who entered the juvenile justice system at age 13 and reads at a fourth grade level has very different needs than a 17-year-old mother who recently left school with academic skills nearly on grade level. As a result, many providers are specializing: they focus on students within a particular skill range or who are eligible for public funding based on age, income, or their involvement with other public agencies. Many programs also take a collaborative approach, working in partnership with public agencies and nonprofit providers, and pooling resources to meet a range of needs. Critical to creating pathways to postsecondary success for opportunity youth is identifying and providing a core range of services accessible from multiple points within communities. (See Figure 2 on the next page.)

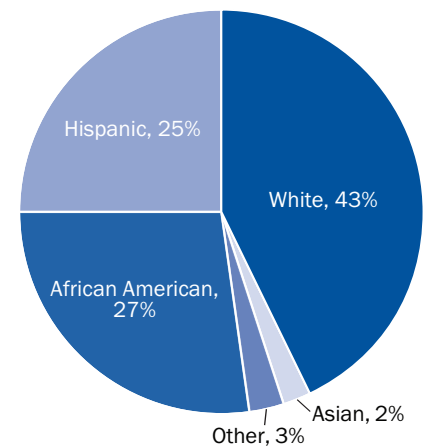
**Academic development: Flexibility, clarity, and individualization matter.** To meet the needs of their students, HSE-plus programs often offer both part-time and full-time academic programs.<sup>23</sup> Many also offer courses at pre-HSE levels, including basic literacy or English as a second language.<sup>24</sup> Some students may require an extended program length to master core skills.<sup>25</sup> For all courses, providers offer clear entry and exit points.<sup>26</sup> Classes and supplemental instruction are highly individualized; students often move at their own pace, working toward clear learning objectives.<sup>27</sup>

**Wraparound support: Stability and safety precede learning.** Effectively serving a youth population with multiple challenges requires more than academic support. Many youth struggle with serious personal and emotional challenges and have experienced failure, or been failed, by the systems designed to support them.<sup>28</sup> These challenges need to be addressed, and appropriate stabilizing supports put in place, before youth are ready to engage in learning or make transitions to postsecondary study and work.<sup>29</sup> Successful HSE-plus programs create a safe environment for learning and provide an array of tailored wraparound supports, often in partnership with other local organizations, to help students address their range of challenges.

**Career preparation: Work gives learning a meaningful context.** Many, even most, youth enter HSE-plus programs with improved employment as their end goal. Programs that introduce youth to career options and connect academic learning to tangible career goals can be more motivating as a result.<sup>30</sup> Skilled programs vary in the extent of their career emphasis: some focus on job exposure and preparation, while others offer full-fledge vocational training alongside academic learning. Some leading programs, like the LaGuardia College GED Bridge to College Program, use career-related topics to ground the academic curriculum.<sup>31</sup> Several studies have shown that curricula that “contextualize” academic skills within work-related scenarios show improved program retention and completion, as well as improved student outcomes in subsequent coursework and earnings.<sup>32</sup>

**Postsecondary transition: It’s more than getting in.** Effective HSE-plus providers do more than help students get into postsecondary programs.

**Figure 1: Racial identification by opportunity youth in the United States<sup>17</sup>**



### How do HSE-plus programs find the youth they serve?

Research literature suggests there are two primary ways that HSE-plus providers attract new students:

- **Targeted recruitment:** Providers advertise in church bulletins, local schools, grocery stores, community newsletters, youth and homeless shelters, bus terminals, on radio and TV, etc.<sup>35</sup> They do in-person recruitment in areas where youth congregate.<sup>36</sup>
- **Referral:** Students find their way into programs through referrals from case workers and service providers.<sup>37</sup> HSE referrals are often part of the formal transition process for youth leaving foster care or the criminal justice system.<sup>38</sup>

Once youth have made a connection, providers will assess their needs and will either match them to an in-house program or refer them to another provider.

**Figure 2: Practices of effective HSE-plus programs**

| Domain   | Research-based Practices  |   |
|--|---|---|
| <p><b>Academic Development:</b> The curriculum and instructional practices that support students to master high school equivalency standards and prepare for further education.</p>                | <p><b>STAFFING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Well-trained (in field of work).<sup>39</sup></li> <li>■ Opportunities for ongoing professional development.<sup>40</sup></li> <li>■ Full-time and/or paid for their preparation time.<sup>41</sup></li> <li>■ Similar experience to the populations they serve.<sup>42</sup></li> <li>■ Small classes and a manageable student load.<sup>43</sup></li> </ul> <p><b>ASSESSMENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Use multiple measures of student knowledge and skills at the beginning of the program and throughout.<sup>44</sup></li> <li>■ Assess mastery of core academics and other skill sets (e.g., job and college readiness, indicators of competency and motivation).<sup>45</sup></li> <li>■ Develop cohorts of students at similar levels, allowing teachers to develop sequenced lessons and common benchmarks.<sup>46</sup></li> <li>■ Create individual action plans with achievable learning targets.<sup>47</sup></li> </ul> | <p><b>CURRICULUM</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ HSE skills and content taught in the context of occupations or college-level academic content.<sup>48</sup></li> <li>■ Explicit development of important college and life skills like confidence, trust, and responsibility.<sup>49</sup></li> <li>■ Attention to building strong study skills, sometimes through supplemental programming.<sup>50</sup></li> <li>■ Clear, short, aligned curriculum modules.<sup>51</sup></li> <li>■ Individualized pacing, with opportunities to accelerate.<sup>52</sup></li> </ul> <p><b>PEDAGOGY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Flexible delivery of content, tailored to students' needs.<sup>53</sup></li> <li>■ Active, engaging learning tasks.<sup>54</sup></li> <li>■ Individualized instruction and frequent one-on-one support from the teacher and tutors.<sup>55</sup></li> <li>■ Clarity and transparency about learning goals, and predictable routines.<sup>56</sup></li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Wraparound Support:</b> The array of adult and peer support that help students address basic needs and achieve a level of social and emotional functioning that makes learning possible.</p> | <p><b>ENVIRONMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Staff versed in youth development principles.<sup>57</sup></li> <li>■ Staff who play the role of mentor, motivator, facilitator, and trusted adult.<sup>58</sup></li> <li>■ Group programming that fosters community and builds peer-to-peer and peer-to-staff relationships.<sup>59</sup></li> </ul> <p><b>PERSONALIZED SUPPORTS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Assistance with basic needs, like food, housing, health and mental health care, daycare.<sup>60</sup></li> <li>■ Financial assistance for HSE tests, training programs, college applications, etc.<sup>61</sup></li> <li>■ Structured counseling and social supports.<sup>62</sup></li> <li>■ Case management and stabilizing supports for youth who are in foster care, homeless, or parenting.<sup>63</sup></li> </ul>  | <p><b>PERSONALIZED SUPPORTS (continued)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Group and individual interventions that promote healthy social, emotional and behavioral functioning.</li> <li>■ Drug and alcohol rehabilitation.</li> </ul> <p><b>LIFE SKILLS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Focus on building confidence, efficacy, and resilience.</li> <li>■ Instruction in managing finances, maintaining hygiene and healthy habits, making positive decisions, coping with stress and crises, professionalism, and collaboration with others.</li> <li>■ Building social service connections and personal networks of support to prevent future disconnection.<sup>64</sup></li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Career Preparation:</b> Activities that provide career exposure, work experience, job-readiness training, and job placement support.</p>   | <p><b>CURRICULUM</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Academic content taught in the context of careers.</li> <li>■ Vocational training connected to clear career paths.<sup>65</sup></li> <li>■ Vocational certification options.<sup>66</sup></li> <li>■ Transition support to occupational certificate programs.<sup>67</sup></li> </ul> <p><b>CAREER EXPLORATION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Career development workshops, summer work experiences, and career fairs.<sup>68</sup></li> <li>■ Career interest and skills inventories.</li> <li>■ Analysis of local employment trends.</li> <li>■ Introduction to career pathways and postsecondary opportunities.<sup>69</sup></li> <li>■ Individual and group employment counseling.</li> <li>■ Personal plans for professional growth.<sup>70</sup></li> </ul>   | <p><b>ASSESSMENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Periodic work skills assessments using measures relevant to particular fields.<sup>71</sup></li> </ul> <p><b>PAID WORK EXPERIENCE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Provides financial stability while students pursue work and learning goals.</li> <li>■ Opportunities to develop workplace skills.</li> <li>■ Exposure to career options and apprenticeship with adult mentors.</li> <li>■ Enhanced social capital through connections with mentors and colleagues.<sup>72</sup></li> </ul> <p><b>EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Employers involved in designing and evaluating career-training programs.<sup>73</sup></li> <li>■ Relationships with employers to facilitate job placement.<sup>74</sup></li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Postsecondary transition:</b> Supports that prepare students for post-secondary environments, support them to apply and enroll, and help them persist to a degree or certificate.</p>        | <p><b>ACADEMIC PREPARATION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Rigorous academic content that prepares students for postsecondary courses.<sup>75</sup></li> <li>■ Study skills and effective learning habits.<sup>76</sup></li> <li>■ Postsecondary placement assessments used to tailor instruction to ensure readiness.<sup>77</sup></li> </ul> <p><b>COLLEGE CONNECTIONS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ College tours and other on-campus experiences.<sup>78</sup></li> <li>■ Dual-enrollment opportunities to earn college or occupational credit.<sup>79</sup></li> <li>■ Visits with local community college staff.<sup>80</sup></li> </ul>  | <p><b>TRANSITION SUPPORT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ On-campus supports through the first year and beyond.<sup>81</sup></li> <li>■ Continued counseling, support, and study groups.</li> <li>■ Support services to troubleshoot issues, such as financial aid advisement.<sup>82</sup></li> </ul>  |

They understand that many students will need ongoing support to complete a degree or certificate. HSE-plus programs can bridge the move to postsecondary and create a seamless transition into college and certificate programs, with a curriculum that incorporates college-ready skills, and explicit instruction to navigate postsecondary systems, application processes, and financial aid, as well as, ongoing counseling, tutoring, and check-ins after students have matriculated.<sup>33</sup> A study of students in City University of New York’s GED Bridge programs showed increased outcomes in HSE passing, college enrollment, and persistence to the second semester when students had these additional supports.<sup>34</sup>

## Assessing the capacity of HSE-plus programs in Massachusetts

Using the four domains in the “Practices of effective HSE-plus programs” on page 5 the Rennie Center chose program sites in Greenfield, New Bedford, and Boston’s Roxbury neighborhood for participation in this study. (See Appendix A for information about community selection.) Programs were selected for participation in interviews if they exhibited elements of HSE preparation (academic development) with two or three additional supports (wraparound, career, or postsecondary transition).<sup>B</sup> Interviews with seven program leaders from HSE-plus programs in the three communities elicited a number of themes consistent with the literature on HSE-plus programs. All seven programs in the study reported serving youth with a wide variety of non-academic needs, similar in profile to opportunity youth nationally. Information about the three communities participating in this research study is described in the text boxes on the next three pages.

### Evidence from Massachusetts

Only two of the participating programs conduct significant recruitment efforts; in their cases, recruitment is driven by funding requirements. Most programs rely on word-of-mouth recommendations among participants and referrals by partner agencies. Youth typically enroll in high school equivalency programs with a goal of passing HSE tests,<sup>C</sup> but the programs offer many more services than test preparation alone. Staff report that they offer many of the supports identified in national research in different combinations and levels of intensity. In nearly every case, program structure and offerings are driven at least partly by funding sources.

#### Who is served by Massachusetts HSE-plus programs?

Most of the youth in participating programs are low-income, ages 19 to 22, unemployed, and left high school without a diploma. (Some programs limited programming to youth 18 and older.) The majority of students in New Bedford and Roxbury are students of color; Greenfield’s students are also disproportionately students of color relative to the town’s population, ranging from 30 to 45 percent of those enrolled. The New Bedford sites are the only participating programs that serve a substantial number of English language learners. Other characteristics of youth engaged in participating programs include:

- Highly mobile, with periods of homelessness;
- Court-involved;
- Currently or previously involved with foster care and/or Department of Children and Families;
- Pregnant or parenting;
- Learning disabilities (many received special education services while in public school);
- Emotional, social, & behavioral challenges;
- Substance abuse;
- Medical or mental illness;
- Experience with trauma; and
- Limited/no family support, adult support, and social support.

<sup>B</sup> Sites selected for participation in this study were not evaluated for outcomes or effectiveness.

<sup>C</sup> In 2015, Massachusetts will begin using the computer-based HiSET tests in lieu of the GED. Due to the timeline for HiSET implementation in the state, the programs participating in this study had not yet had any students take the new test.

## PARTICIPATING COMMUNITY **Greenfield**

Rural Greenfield, Massachusetts is home to a tight network of agencies working together to serve its sizeable population of opportunity youth. Offerings include a mix of highly structured HSE preparation courses and career-readiness workshops (supported largely through state and federal grants) and more organic programming that connects youth to the range of services they need. Greenfield's small size and role as the seat of Franklin County makes collaboration the standard mode of operation, an advantage for providers. One program director explains: "We're really fortunate to have a great deal of youth-serving organizations and providers in the community who work collaboratively...so one person isn't burdened to be the only person in the young person's life to reach their milestone." Providers recognize, however, that there is still a large number of youth who are not reached by their network of services, partially due to a lack of regional transportation services.

### By the numbers<sup>83</sup>

- Population: 17,543
- Median household income: \$48,370
- 66.6% of adults over age 16 employed in labor force
- 16.3% of people live below the poverty line
- 77.8% of students graduate high school in four years
- 8.6% of adults over 25 do not have a high school diploma
- 25.6% of adults over 25 have a Bachelor's degree or higher
- 4.6% of high school seniors who dropped out earned HSE

### Program profiles

**Pathways to MCAS Success** (run through the Franklin-Hampshire Regional Employment Board) serves youth who have not yet earned their high school diploma or HSE and have not passed one or more portions of the MCAS exam.<sup>E</sup> The program serves about 100 students at a time, with varying levels of support that includes MCAS tutoring and high school equivalency preparation. A flexible design allows a staff of one to tailor referrals and select in-house services to the needs of youth. Offerings include: academic assessment and tutoring; career advising, training and placement assistance; college and financial aid application assistance; service referrals; and minimal financial assistance to overcome barriers to success. For youth who cannot earn a diploma or HSE before aging out at 22 (due to funding restrictions), Pathways works to develop a life plan and ensure they are engaged with other appropriate services.

**WIA Youth Programs** (also run through the Regional Employment Board) serves youth ages 14-21 who meet one or more federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) eligibility criteria (e.g., low income, receiving public assistance, homeless or in foster care, parenting). The program serves 70 to 80 youth per year, more than a quarter of whom are high school dropouts. Participants typically access services from multiple organizations. The array of offerings include: HSE preparation; basic skills tutoring; career interest exploration; subsidized summer jobs; job readiness and skills training; job search and application support; counseling to support goal setting and achievement; and peer leadership opportunities.

The programs attempt to serve nearly all youth who come through their doors. They do not report turning many students away for academic reasons and find that youth referred by partner agencies (the majority of their caseloads) are typically a good match because partners understand the services they offer. Programs receiving federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding limit enrollment to youth who meet requirements in terms of income and age.<sup>D</sup> Unlike traditional public education settings, HSE-plus programs bridge the social service sector and education: among communities participating in this study, HSE-plus programs serving opportunity youth recognize the need to address the whole student in order to improve educational outcomes.

The programs generally do not have long-term data about their participants and lack the resources to comprehensively track former participants, but staff report that, upon exiting the programs, most youth enter directly into careers. A large number also transition to two-year degree and certificate programs or occupational training. Few enroll in four-year colleges directly, though some may take that step after beginning in a two-year program. When students are unable to remain enrolled in an HSE-plus program until completion, the programs maintain an open-door policy, welcoming youth back when life circumstances make further study possible.

D In July 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was signed into law. The new act supersedes WIA and places increased emphasis on opportunity youth. More information can be found at [www.doleta.gov/wioa/](http://www.doleta.gov/wioa/).

E This program is no longer operational as of August 30, 2014.

**Academic development: Multiple options.** Programs vary in the structure and dosage of their academic support. Upon entry, most programs use Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and other internal measures to group students of similar ability levels in cohorts and to refer them to external organizations' services as needed. Programs typically offer regularly scheduled courses in one or more of the following academic areas:

- **Basic skills (pre-HSE):** Youth in these courses have low reading levels as determined by the TABE. Courses are often funded by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as Adult Basic Education programs. After completion, students are eligible to enroll in an HSE preparation course.
- **HSE preparation:** Most programs have developed their own HSE-prep curricula, incorporating academic skills beyond the test itself and meeting curriculum guidelines of funders as required. Classes are small and led by a teacher who differentiates instruction to individual needs. One program uses the Kahn Academy online learning program to supplement instruction, although technology challenges limit its use.
- **Postsecondary preparation:** These courses are rarer and serve students who have passed all or most of the HSE tests and are interested in attending college or other postsecondary training. Courses model college rigor and teach skills related to professionalism, communication, presenting work, and managing a college schedule.
- **Supplemental and informal academic services:** Programs provide additional academic services based on need, including one-on-one tutoring, subject or skill-specific courses, and independent test prep using HSE books. Programs offering these services tend to offer less-comprehensive HSE preparation courses.
- **HSE practice assessments:** Several programs ask students to take multiple practice tests until they are familiar with the content and structure of the test. They only refer them to an HSE test provider when students have proven themselves ready.

**Wraparound supports: All hands on deck.** Staff report taking an "all hands on deck" approach to ensuring youth have the support they need to be successful. Programs work with partner organizations and use internal resources to provide an array of wraparound supports themselves, including:

- **Case management:** Some organizations employ trained social workers; in others, staff take on case management responsibilities. Case managers do everything from helping youth fulfill basic needs to providing one-on-one counseling and managing referrals to external agencies.
- **Advising and mentoring:** Staff typically serve as informal advisors and mentors to the youth they serve, building trusting relationships through which they can model behaviors and strategies youth need to be successful in life beyond the HSE.
- **Life skills development:** Staff report that youth typically lack the skills they need to meet their goals. Some programs teach life skills as a formal course throughout the week, focusing on such topics as financial literacy, self-advocacy, and nutrition. Across all programs, staff share a goal of developing internal resources, such as resilience and agency, so youth are able to manage future challenges and pursue their goals.

**Career preparation: A range of intensity.** Participating programs varied in how they approach career preparation. Those receiving WIA funds provide more extensive work-based learning opportunities; others build lighter doses of career exploration and employment support into their advising and case management structures. Most have found that students are highly motivated by career content (they typically enroll in HSE programs with the goal of improving employment options), so even programs that do not have a specific career focus often integrate career-relevant content into their programming. The range of supports include:

- **Contextualized curriculum:** Most programs shape academic courses to reflect students' career goals, teaching core content in the context of work-related topics.
- **Career advising:** Many programs offer job readiness workshops and individual coaching, providing resume and interview support, work skills assessments, overview of trends in the local labor market, and opportunities to observe and practice professional behaviors and norms. Several refer to partner organizations to provide these services.
- **Work experience and apprenticeships:** Two programs provide paid or subsidized work experiences. In the case of both YouthBuild programs, work apprenticeship is at the core of the program model.
- **Job connections:** Some programs play a role in connecting youth with local employers and job opportunities. If job-training services aren't offered in-house, they refer youth to partner organizations where they can access more comprehensive career support.



## PARTICIPATING COMMUNITY **New Bedford**

New Bedford is a small city with one of the highest annual high school dropout rates in the state. The city boasts a large number of community services aimed at alleviating poverty and its effects on families, but there are fewer education-oriented programs. Several local organizations serving opportunity youth are resourced through state and federal funds (e.g., the federal Workforce Investment Act) that are typically earmarked for particular purposes. Program design reflects these constraints and community leaders express concern about unmet needs. Of particular concern, there is a large population of pregnant/parenting teens and young adults within the city's opportunity youth population which have not been part of existing outreach and retention efforts made by existing programming.

### By the numbers<sup>84</sup>

- Population: 94,952
- Median household income: \$36,789
- 62.5% of adults over age 16 employed in labor force
- 21.6% of all people are below the poverty line
- 55% of students graduate high school in four years
- 31.3% of adults over 25 do not have a high school diploma
- 14.8% of adults over 25 have a Bachelor's degree or higher
- 1.9% of high school seniors who dropped out earned HSE

### Program profiles

**ACHIEVE! Youth Opportunity Program** at the New Bedford site of Training Resources of America provides a comprehensive array of services for 15-30 out-of-school youth between the ages of 16 and 21. Services include: HSE preparation; customer service vocational skills training resulting in a nationally-recognized certification; job readiness training; unpaid work experiences and internships; computer and clerical skills training; leadership development; job placement assistance; and comprehensive guidance and referral services. The program's mission is to provide a continuum of services that meet each young person's educational and workforce needs.

**YouthBuild New Bedford** uses the national program model, and each year provides 30 youth ages 16-24 in the Greater New Bedford area supports toward earning high school equivalency, carpentry and green skills, community service, and postsecondary education. The goal of this YouthBuild site is to provide young adults with the opportunities to become productive citizens through academic instruction, community service, and life-skills training, leadership, and career development. Several of these strategies are part of a "mental toughness" component. The program expects all youth to engage in a service partnership with New Bedford agencies that help the community to develop a relationship with—and responsibility for—the benefit of themselves, their families, and their neighbors.

**Postsecondary transition: A critical area of need.** This was by far the least-developed area among the programs participating in this study. Only one program emphasized postsecondary support as a core part of its programming; most programs offered only a few pieces of the elements below. The postsecondary transition services these programs provide include:

- **Campus visits and information sessions:** Several programs plan visits to local campuses to observe classes, meet staff, and demystify the college experience. Programs also host visits from staff of postsecondary programs, who introduce participants to degree and certification programs they might consider and application requirements.
- **Application support:** Several programs offer college admissions workshops and one-on-one support with applications, financial aid forms, and other admission requirements.
- **Placement tests:** Some programs administer the Accuplacer test—used by public institutes of higher education to assess the skills of incoming students—helping students see where they stand on skills required for credit-bearing coursework and addressing any gaps.
- **College skills development:** Some programs offer college preparation courses and workshops that teach students college-ready skills, like critical thinking and oral presentation. They also teach skills related to organization and managing a college workload.

# The path forward

The Rennie Center’s scan of HSE-plus programs in three Massachusetts communities revealed substantial overlap with what is known about best practices in educating opportunity youth. Interviews exposed several additional themes that may not be unique to these communities and will be important to consider for those seeking to create new pathways and expand existing programs to meet the needs of opportunity youth.

**Postsecondary transition programming remains underdeveloped.** While youth typically do not engage in HSE-plus with postsecondary ambitions, staff recognize that some postsecondary education and training will be necessary for their long-term stability. Most programs introduce youth to the idea of postsecondary learning and provide some support with the application process. A small subset of programs offers more comprehensive postsecondary preparation through the academic curriculum and supplementary supports. While research suggests that continuous support through college is critical to postsecondary outcomes, such support is largely absent in the programs participating in this study. Of these programs, only one had an explicit postsecondary transition goal and provided the comprehensive support youth need to prepare, enroll, and persist to completion.

In most cases, funding or capacity limitations do not allow continued support for youth after they have completed the HSE program and are enrolled in a postsecondary program. A few programs are able to offer tutoring, case management, and assistance purchasing books when funds are available. Most programs will help former students on an as-requested basis, although former students have difficulty seeking out the resources they need to be successful. Several of the participating programs have developed a relationship with a local community college, allowing them to support former participants who enroll in that institution.

**Sustained engagement isn’t easy—or possible—for every young person.** Most programs use a formal goal-setting process, and use weekly or monthly meetings to monitor and adjust students’ progress toward their goals. Youth play a role in setting their own goals in each of the participating programs, and staff work with youth to set goals during the enrollment stage. Because students begin in different places and have different aspirations, the length of their commitment varies. Youth entering with higher academic skills may need only two or three months to pass the HSE; some of these youth may remain longer for college preparation courses, if available. Meanwhile, youth entering with low academic skills may need one or two years of preparation to reach their goals. Staff generally encourage students to attend the program as often as possible to accelerate their progress, but not all youth who enroll are able to sustain the commitment necessary to reach their goals. Three obstacles are very common:

- **Funding:** Some funding sources can only be used for youth under the age of 25, and older youth may “age out” before completing the program (and moving on to programming oriented to older adults); other funders limit youth involvement to two years.
- **Life challenges:** A large number of opportunity youth face personal challenges that make consistent attendance challenging or impossible. Poor attendance puts their goals further afield and can lead to total disengagement.
- **Unrealistic expectations:** Managing youth’s own expectations can be difficult; some may be demoralized when they understand the length of time it will take to reach their goals, or grow frustrated if poor attendance slows their progress, resulting in further disengagement.

When students cease attending or are formally unenrolled, programs try to maintain connections and encourage them to return at any time. Staff told us that “attendance is not linear;” many youth drop out of a program and drop back in when their circumstances change.

**Wraparound support makes a difference.** Not surprisingly, the youth who attend participating programs often need extensive support before they are ready to learn. Staff overwhelmingly agreed that wraparound supports are a critical part of their programming. Participants’ needs are significant—everything from basic food and shelter considerations to medical and mental health services to positive modeling of skills that are crucial to their long-term success, like taking responsibility and bouncing back from adversity. Often youth enroll without understanding the extent to which personal and external factors will influence their academic progress. One program leader estimates that only about half of youth who enroll are connected to all of the services they need. Program staff note that wraparound supports are often the most influential factors contributing

## PARTICIPATING COMMUNITY **Roxbury**

Located in the heart of Boston, the Roxbury neighborhood has among the highest poverty rates in the city and some of the lowest rates of employment and educational attainment. The community benefits from several HSE providers offering the advantage of proximity and safety with programming located right in the neighborhood. Many of these programs feature clear goals, a strong focus, and efficient delivery systems, and expect several positive outcomes for the youth they serve. Providers also benefit from a citywide service network and non-profit service providers that offer alternative education, career exploration, and summer job programs for Boston youth. Connecting agencies—such as the Boston Youth Service Network—contribute to the Youth Transitions Task Force, which convenes non-profit providers and local and state agencies dedicated to supporting struggling and disconnected youth.

### By the numbers<sup>85</sup>

- Population: 48,454
- Median household income: \$27,859
- 59% of adults over age 16 employed in labor force
- 35% of people below the poverty line
- 65.9% of students graduate high school in four years (City of Boston total)
- 25% of adults over 25 do not have a high school diploma
- 21% of adults over 25 have a Bachelor's degree or higher
- 1.6% of high school seniors who dropped out earned HSE (City of Boston total)

### Program profiles

**GED Plus** aims to empower up to 50 youth ages 16 to 24 by providing the academic skills they need to achieve high school equivalency, as well as the social competencies and agency they need to navigate systems and advocate for themselves in the face of discrimination or other challenges. The program directly confronts the mitigating circumstances and poor choices that caused students to drop out of high school, encouraging youth to look beyond HSE towards becoming fulfilled, self-sufficient, and productive members of society. GED Plus provides: individualized services with a case manager; employment and career exploration assistance; referrals to legal, medical, housing, mental health, substance abuse, and other services; application assistance for training programs, colleges, and financial aid; and HSE practice tests. Program staff make frequent visits to other effective programs and are currently implementing practices learned from LaGuardia College's GED Bridge program.

**X-Cel Education** provides customized academic instruction to help low-income adults over age 18 achieve high school completion and enter college-level study. With no centralized location, X-Cel partners with neighborhood-based non-profits to provide adult education services in convenient community locations while greatly reducing overhead costs. Instruction happens in small groups, with about 250 students per year entering the program on a rolling basis and advancing at their own pace. Some staff are program alumni who build strong connections with youth; a core of volunteers provide tutoring and individualized classroom support. The program invests in extensive college preparation and induction support, and the program model provides continued service while students are enrolled in postsecondary. Although career support is not part of the program structure, staff have realized this element is valued by participants and critical to success after leaving the program, and have begun to incorporate career supports into programming.

**YouthBuild Boston**, headquartered in Roxbury, is a well-funded and well-respected member of YouthBuild's national network, serving 30-60 youth per year. YouthBuild began as a job training and apprenticeship program in the building trades and includes a self-developed academic program that includes HSE preparation, leadership and community service opportunities, and a life skills curriculum that helps youth build the skills they need to "navigate a positive pathway to self-sufficiency and neighborhood responsibility." Postsecondary education is not a focus of this YouthBuild site; the vast majority of participants are interested in gaining work-based experience and benefit from the program's strong relationships with local employers. This site benefits from a close partnership with local labor unions who welcome youth into apprenticeship training programs.

to program success. Youth who are connected to other services are the most likely to achieve their goals because they are more likely to have their basic needs met and have the assistance they need to troubleshoot new challenges.

External partners provide a range of supports, including financial assistance with basic and academic needs (e.g., clothing, food, transportation, HSE test registration, driver's education, books and materials), connections to critical services (e.g., housing, health and mental health, child care services, probation), additional academic support (e.g., basic skills courses, one-on-one tutoring, additional adult education courses), career supports (e.g., job fairs, resume workshops, job search assistance, paid and unpaid internships and work experience), and postsecondary supports (e.g., Accuplacer practice, college skills preparation, financial counseling).

**No program can do it all—partnerships matter.** The programs participating in this study demonstrate several elements of quality programming outlined in the literature, but no one program can do everything. In fact, program staff emphasize they are not trying to meet every student need in-house, instead aiming to utilize the resources in their local communities to provide the array of wraparound support youth need. While most of the organizations provide some level of case management, they find it far more efficient to refer out to community partners for specific issues. They report that their communities have a wealth of supports and that youth need help learning to access them. Staff model making those connections and help students develop a sense of agency.

One challenge with this multi-provider approach is that youth may struggle with the logistics of remaining connected to all of the services they need. For example, off-site child care may be challenging to access during HSE course hours for a parent without a vehicle. Communities vary in the degree to which they are able to provide seamless support to youth. Greenfield, the most rural community participating in this study, benefits from a well-planned network of connections among local agencies across Franklin-Hampshire County but lacks a well-established transportation network. Meanwhile, communities with large numbers of opportunity youth, like Roxbury, have the advantage of a large web of youth service providers but may lack the connectedness of a smaller community. At both ends of the spectrum, communities appear to benefit from a central organizing agency—such as a workforce investment board or regional employment board—that pulls together several elements of support and provides partnering organizations with financial resources to take a more collaborative and integrated approach to youth development.

**Community capacity for HSE-plus programs is limited by inconsistent financial support.** Unlike public schools, programs providing academic services in preparation for the HiSET and beyond rarely have reliable funding sources. HSE-plus programs do not benefit from Chapter 70 funds allocated to school districts through the Massachusetts state budget. Although these programs do serve school-aged youth and seek the same goals as public high schools, they subsist on funds gathered from a wide variety of sources. If funds are provided to an organization through a state or federal grant (e.g., the Massachusetts Competitive Academic Support Services Pathways One Stop Career Center Initiative, the federal Workforce Investment Act Youth Program), the ways in which organizations use them are tightly regulated; these restrictions often reduce the number and types of youth the program may serve.

Of the several organizations participating in this study that serve a small number of youth each year (between 15-60 youth), all report funding is of great concern to them. Almost all participating organizations express concern about providing the youth with non-academic supports (e.g., career or wraparound supports) in addition to high-quality academic preparation on restrictive budgets. This study revealed funding is so inconsistent in some communities that programs can shutter unexpectedly, leaving a portion of the opportunity youth in that community unserved.<sup>F</sup> Struggles like this emphasize that HSE-plus programs fall squarely outside of the public education system, leaving both the programs and youth they serve to fend for themselves.

**Staff build strong connections with youth, regardless of previous experience.** Participating programs hire a mix of full- and part-time staff with different levels of experience. Regardless of role or responsibilities, program leaders expressed the importance of having staff who are skilled in forming bonds with students and promoting positive youth development. Programs typically employ small numbers of staff (one to four individuals), and all employees play an important mentoring role. Staff frequently have close ties to the community in which they work and are deeply invested in maximizing existing opportunities and resources that can aid youth in reaching their goals. A few programs employ young adults with similar life experiences to the youth served; these adults serve as valuable resources to engage youth.

Research literature indicates staff should be well-trained; however, only some programs hire certified teachers and social workers; those programs that do so are largely responding to funding requirements. Irrespective of hiring practices, not all staff in instructional or case management roles have this training. One program employs a former special education teacher for its primary instructional role; another program relies on staff who are program alumni and a large volunteer corps to help deliver programming. As a whole, formal induction for new employees and staff development opportunities are inconsistent. A few organizations provide internal professional development or send staff to external trainings and model sites in other

<sup>F</sup> As of August 30, 2014, Greenfield's Pathways to MCAS program is not funded and shut down operations after 15 years. Grant funding for the program—provided by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education—has changed priorities, and a proposal submitted by Pathways to MCAS was not accepted.

states, but these are not regularly scheduled. These professional development opportunities typically focus on program features the organization is seeking to implement, such as strengthening links between career preparation and the academic curriculum.

## Policy considerations

Given the level of need that characterizes opportunity youth, HSE-plus models have a role in a system of supports for delivering a coordinated array of academic and social services. Evidence from this research study suggests, however, that even communities with plentiful HSE-plus options struggle to establish this coordinated approach. Individual programs with flexible schedules and responsive programming often find success with the youth they enroll, but too little attention is paid to ensuring a community-wide investment in providing *all* youth with access to essential supports. Communities would benefit from transparent planning processes aimed at meeting youth needs and coordinating program services. Informed by the findings presented in this brief, the Rennie Center provides the following considerations for policymakers and community and HSE program leaders.

### For community leaders and policymakers

**Develop a community-wide vision for providing services to opportunity youth.** Working together, community leaders can strategically plan for services to be provided in a way that makes them more easily accessible to opportunity youth and sustainably funded. Research, supported by this study, points to four categories of supports needed in HSE-plus programs: academic, career, wraparound, and postsecondary. However, it is not feasible in most communities for any one program to provide such a range of academic and social supports. Even programs able to provide comprehensive programming often encounter youth with unique needs better served by more specialized programs. Collaborative planning processes among key stakeholders, including workforce/employment boards, public schools, community-based organizations, and state agencies, can better identify target populations, align existing services, remedy gaps in services, and leverage existing and potential funding sources. Such work can produce advocacy for the HSE-plus field, a community-wide vision for supporting opportunity youth, and a matrixed approach for addressing specific needs based on clear and detailed information shared across organizations. Figure 3 (on page 14)—developed by Mathematica Policy Research—demonstrates a research-based conceptual framework for advancing the self-sufficiency and well-being of at-risk youth; a matrix of organizations can aid a community in addressing the needs of a service framework. Ultimately, a strategic planning process can push communities toward engaging a broader set of institutions (e.g., community colleges, 4-year colleges, occupational training/apprenticeship programs) to develop fully realized pathways to postsecondary success.

**Establish a community agency as a central hub for coordinating program services.** An organization playing the role of “central hub” can support and advance a community-wide vision for serving opportunity youth by establishing communication and management systems that provide a clear understanding of existing and needed programming. This organization can play a pivotal role in cultivating relationships with all relevant service providers (HSE preparation, career development, wraparound services, postsecondary support and institutions), as well as engaging public schools. Within this type of network, providers can lead youth in a collaborative process to identify and access the best match for services in the community through a needs assessment and goal-setting. Communities may consider developing a system for sharing basic information about services and youth, such as the Boston Navigator, a tool that provides access to information shared across out-of-school-time agencies.<sup>6</sup> A central hub organization can also take on a more proactive role, brokering information-sharing arrangements based on common protocols and facilitating youth access to several types of services from a single application process or point of entry.

### For high school equivalency program leaders

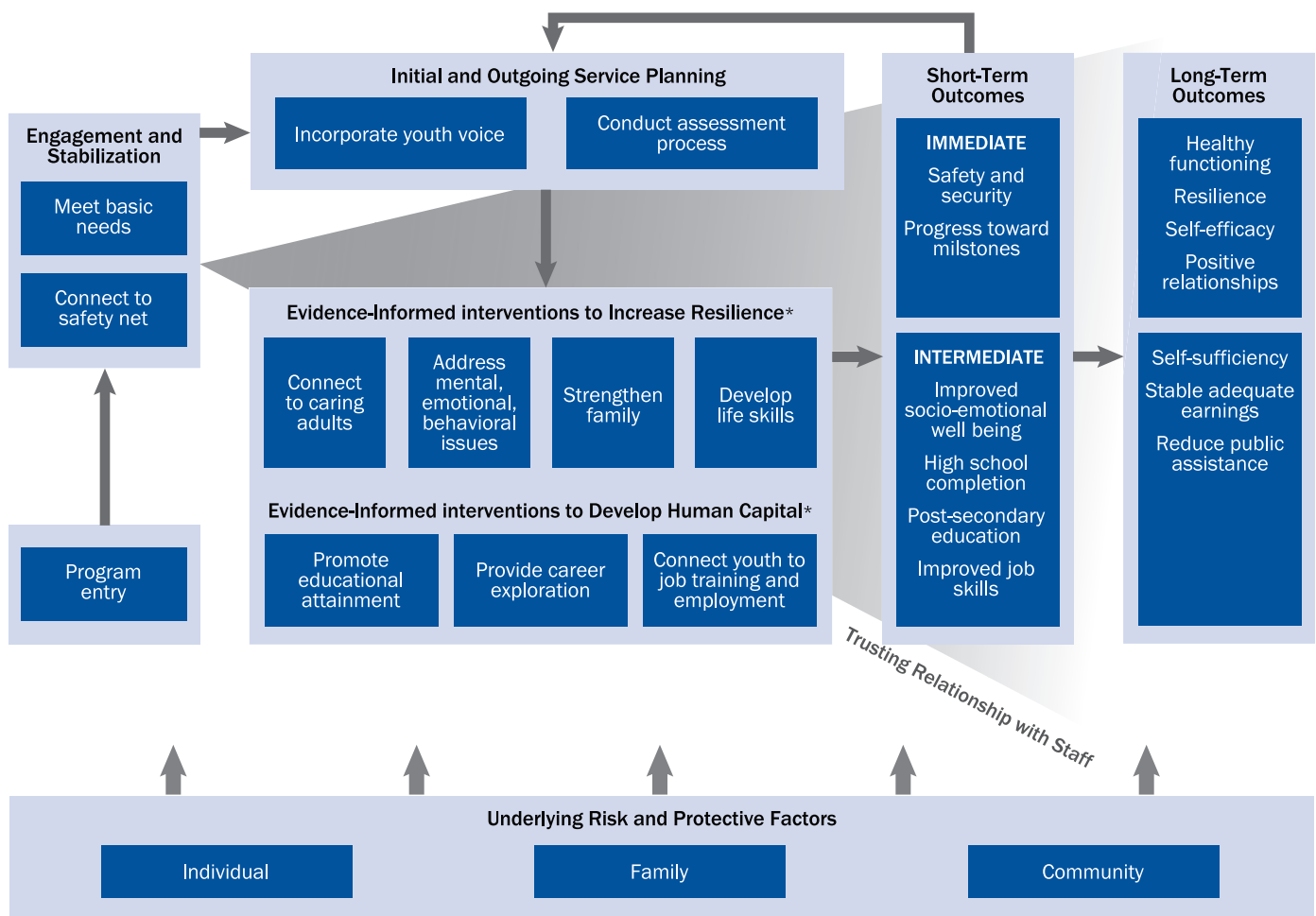
**Develop a human capital strategy that includes a diverse, well-prepared staff.** It is important to ensure that opportunity youth are receiving rigorous instruction and differentiated support that sets them up to make progress toward academic and life milestones. HSE-plus programs can hire staff that use a positive youth development frame, and are highly-qualified to

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see [www.bostonnavigator.org](http://www.bostonnavigator.org)

instruct in academic content or mentor opportunity youth. Many programs value and hire staff “from the community” with close ties to multiple agencies and long-term commitments to working with local residents. This strategy allows for essential relationship-building with opportunity youth engaged in the program. However, many programs do not employ certified teachers or social workers, and only a handful of program staff have a credential or any type of formal training. HSE-plus programs need critical conversations about what “qualified” staff look like in each service area, as this may differ greatly by role. On-the-job orientation for new staff to build strong academic and non-academic skills is also essential and in the interest of providing opportunity youth with adequate support to complete program components.

**Expand and improve upon existing postsecondary supports.** Clearer, more intentional links to postsecondary education are needed in HSE-plus programs. Most programs provide some guidance about, and connection to, higher education and training, but severely lack comprehensive, ongoing supports for opportunity youth after they earn a HSE credential. More enduring connections between program staff and youth can help address both academic and non-academic needs at the postsecondary level. For example, HSE-plus programs can offer tutoring and office hour appointments to help students engage with academic content. Programs may also provide support for non-academic needs, including guidance on registration and financial aid, as well as continued life coaching. Maintaining support when youth are not on-site (and located at a postsecondary institution) is not easy. Youth may be unlikely to reach out to an HSE-plus program, even if assistance is desired. Supports designed to follow youth into postsecondary need to start early and be built into program design; if they are not, youth are likely to struggle to complete a postsecondary degree or credential.

**Figure 3. Conceptual framework for advancing the self-sufficiency and well-being of at-risk youth**



\*Interventions are selected based on each youth’s assessment results.

Source of diagram: Dion, M.R. (March 2013). *Issue Brief: A Framework for Advancing the Well-Being and Self-Sufficiency of At-Risk Youth*. Mathematica Policy Research.

## Conclusion

In Massachusetts and around the country, a substantial commitment has emerged among programs working to re-engage young people disconnected for school and work and improve their life circumstances. HSE-plus programs are at the forefront of these efforts, helping opportunity youth find ways to further their education and family-sustaining careers. But, the needs of opportunity youth are complex and varied. No single organization can address them all. The most successful programs attend to at least four areas of support—academic, wraparound, career, and postsecondary—often working with local partners to provide the full web of services that help youth function more effectively and advance as learners.

HSE-plus programs in Massachusetts communities implement many of the practices that national research suggests are most effective in improving the outcomes of opportunity youth. There is more work to do. Many youth—including the most profoundly disengaged—have yet to benefit from these services, and we can do more to improve the outcomes of those attempting to achieve high school equivalency. Most notably, the Rennie Center’s study of Massachusetts programs suggests that communities need more capacity in supporting youth through the postsecondary transition. Lessons learned from national and local programs offer promising approaches that can guide local efforts to create strong bridges to and through postsecondary completion.

# Appendix A: Sample selection

The text below describes the process by which researchers used purposive sampling to choose Massachusetts communities for participation in this research study.

## **Sampling phase 1: Determine which communities in Massachusetts have resources and/or services targeted at opportunity youth.**

Since no comprehensive list of the desired programming exists, researchers chose Adult Basic Education (ABE) providers as a proxy for programs serving opportunity youth. Using the Massachusetts ABE Directory,<sup>86</sup> researchers sorted all communities with any ABE programs by the number of sites listed. All communities with fewer than 2 sites were removed.

## **Sampling phase 2: Choose communities for participation.**

To narrow down the list of potential participant communities to a sample of three, researchers gathered data about each of the communities, including graduation and dropout rates, rates of youth in a high school senior cohort taking the high school equivalency exam, and rates of high school students attending institutes of higher education. Key stakeholders provided additional information about programming available in each community. Communities were chosen based on extent of need for services (low high school graduation and attendance in postsecondary education rates) and community size (urban, suburban, and rural). The communities chosen for participation were the Roxbury neighborhood in the City of Boston, New Bedford, and Greenfield.

## **Sampling phase 3: Choose programs for participation in qualitative interviews.**

Researchers engaged in brief telephone conversations with key stakeholders in all three communities to determine which services are available to opportunity youth and represent a viable pathway to a high school credential and support for/ connection to career or postsecondary education. Conversations sought to determine the existence of any of the following four domains of services: academic/high school equivalency exam preparation; wraparound; career; and postsecondary. Programs reporting they provide 3-4 of the aforementioned services were chosen for participation in qualitative interviews with Rennie Center researchers. Interviews sought to understand what HSE-plus supports looked like in practice, as well as provide an understanding of the pathway through which opportunity youth arrived at/left through.



## References in alphabetical order

- Belfield, C., Levin, H., & Rosen, R. (2012). *The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth*. Washington D.C.: Civic Enterprises.
- Bloom, D., Thompson, S. L., & Ivry, R. (2010). *Building a Learning Agenda Around Disconnected Youth*. New York: MDRC. Retrieved from <http://www.mdrc.org/publication/building-learning-agenda-around-disconnected-youth>.
- Boston Private Industry Council. (2014). *Literature Review on Programs Serving Opportunity Youth*. Boston, MA: Boston Private Industry Council.
- Boston Redevelopment Authority. (2014). *Boston in Context: Neighborhoods*. Boston, MA: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.bostonredevelopmentauthority.org/research-maps/research-publications/neighborhoods>.
- Bridgeland, J. M., & Milano, J. A. (2012). *Opportunity Road: The Promise and Challenge of America's Forgotten Youth*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Labor. Retrieved from <http://www.dol.gov/summerjobs/pdf/OpportunityRoad.pdf>.
- Brinson, D., Hassel, B., & Rosch, J. (2008). *Connecting Youth through Multiple Pathways*. Baltimore, MD: Public Impact.
- Center for Labor Market Studies and Boston Private Industry Council. (2008). *Key Findings—Summary of Three Reports on the Social and Fiscal Consequences of the Dropout Crisis*. Boston, MA: Center for Labor Market Studies and Boston Private Industry Council.
- City of Boston. (2013). *2007-2011 American Community Survey-Roxbury*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Commerce. Retrieved from <https://data.cityofboston.gov/dataset/Roxbury-neighborhood-American-Community-Survey-200/hr8h-d4cv>.
- Colorado Children's Campaign. (2012). *Alternative Education and Pathways to Success*. Denver, CO: Colorado Children's Campaign.
- Corcoran, M., Hanleybrown, F., Steinberg, A., & Tallant, K. (2012). *Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth*. Boston, MA: FSG. Retrieved from [http://www.fsg.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/PDF/Collective\\_Impact\\_for\\_Opportunity\\_Youth.pdf?cpgn=WP%20DL%20-%20Opportunity%20Youth](http://www.fsg.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/PDF/Collective_Impact_for_Opportunity_Youth.pdf?cpgn=WP%20DL%20-%20Opportunity%20Youth).
- Dion, M. R. (2013). *A Framework for Advancing the Well-Being and Self-Sufficiency of At-Risk Youth*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica. Retrieved from [http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/family\\_support/YDD\\_Framework\\_IB.pdf](http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/family_support/YDD_Framework_IB.pdf).
- Fein, D. (2012). *Career Pathways as a Framework for Program Design and Evaluation*. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, Inc. Retrieved from [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/inno\\_strategies.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/inno_strategies.pdf).
- Foley, R. M., & Pang, L. S. (2006). Alternative education programs: Program and student characteristics. *The High School Journal*, 89(3), 10–21. doi:10.1353/hsj.2006.0003
- Foster, M. M., Strawn, J., & Duke-Benfield, A. E. (2011). *State Strategies to Connect Low-Skilled Students to an Employer-Valued Postsecondary Education*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy. Retrieved from [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org).
- Garvey, J., & Grobe, T. (2011). *From GED to College Degree: Creating Pathways to Postsecondary Success for High School Dropouts*. Boston: Jobs for the Future. Retrieved from <http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/resource/345>.
- Hageage, A. (2011). *Plugged In: Positive Development Strategies for Disconnected Latino Youth*. Washington, D.C.: National Council of La Raza. Retrieved from: [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.ncwe.org/resource/resmgr/workforce\\_dev\\_reports/pluggedin\\_report\\_final\\_web\\_1.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.ncwe.org/resource/resmgr/workforce_dev_reports/pluggedin_report_final_web_1.pdf).
- Heinrich, C. J., & Holzer, H. J. (2010). *Improving Education and Employment for Disadvantaged Young Men: Proven Promising Strategies*. Ann Arbor, MI: National Poverty Center. Retrieved from [http://www.npc.umich.edu/publications/working\\_papers/](http://www.npc.umich.edu/publications/working_papers/).
- Martin, V., & Broadus, J. (2013). *Enhancing GED Instruction to Prepare Students for College and Careers*. New York, NY: MDRC. Retrieved from [http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Enhancing\\_GED\\_Instruction\\_brief.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Enhancing_GED_Instruction_brief.pdf)
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2013). *Massachusetts Adult Basic Education Directory*. Malden, MA: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Retrieved from <http://acls.doemass.org/pDirectoryBrowse?category=siteType>.
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2014). *School and District Profiles*. Malden, MA: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Retrieved from <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>.
- National Compadres Network/National Latino Fatherhood and Family Institute. (2012). *Lifting Latinos Up By Their "Rootstraps:" Moving Beyond Trauma Through A Healing-Informed Framework for Latino Boys and Men*. San Jose, CA: Author. Retrieved from: [http://comprinters.com/FlipBooks/7053\\_NLFFI/files/assets/downloads/publication.pdf](http://comprinters.com/FlipBooks/7053_NLFFI/files/assets/downloads/publication.pdf).
- National League of Cities. (2007). *Reengaging Disconnected Youth: Action Kit for Municipal Leaders*. Washington, D.C.: National League of Cities. Retrieved from [disconnected-youth-action-kit-apr07.pdf](http://disconnected-youth-action-kit-apr07.pdf)
- Nelson, J. (2011). *Strategies to Re-Engage Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training: A Rapid Review*. London, UK: The Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services. Retrieved from <http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/youth/files/youth-rapid-review-reengage-young-people-not-in-education-employment-or-training.pdf>.
- Rutschow, E., & Crary-Ross, S. (2014). *Beyond the GED: Promising Models for Moving HS Dropouts to College*. New York, NY: MDRC. Retrieved from [http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Beyond\\_the\\_GED\\_FR\\_0.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Beyond_the_GED_FR_0.pdf).
- Steele, C.M. & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(5), 797-811. Retrieved from: <http://mnas.pbworks.com/f/claude%20steele%20stereotype%20threat%201995.pdf>.
- Tallant, K. (2012). A call for collective impact for opportunity youth. *Collective Impact Blog*. Retrieved from <http://www.fsg.org/KnowledgeExchange/Blogs/CollectiveImpact/PostID/354.aspx>.
- Tyler, J. H. (2005). The General Educational Development (GED) credential: History, current research, and directions for policy and practice. *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, 5, 45-84.
- United States Census Bureau. (2014). *2008-2012 American Community Survey*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Commerce. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/acs/www/>.

United States Congressional Research Service. (2009) *Disconnected Youth: A look at 16- to 24-year olds who are not working or in school* by Adrienne L. Fernandes & Thomas Gabe. From Bridgeland, J. M., & Milano, J. A. (2012). *Opportunity Road: The Promise and Challenge of America's Forgotten Youth*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Labor. Retrieved from <http://www.dol.gov/summerjobs/pdf/OpportunityRoad.pdf>.

United States Government Accountability Office. (February 2008). *Disconnected Youth: Federal Action Could Address Some of the Challenges Faced by Local Programs That Reconnect Youth to Education and Employment*. Washington, D.C.: Author. Retrieved from: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/280/272790.pdf>.

Ziegler, M., & Ebert, O. (2003). *Common Characteristics of Adult Education Programs Reporting the Highest GED Attainment Rates for Families First Participants in Tennessee*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee.

## Endnotes

- 1 Belfield, C., Levin, H., and Rosen, R. (2012).
- 2 Tallant, K. (2012).
- 3 Center for Labor Market Studies and Boston Private Industry Council. (2008).
- 4 Belfield, C., Levin, H., and Rosen, R. (2012).
- 5 Belfield, C., Levin, H., and Rosen, R. (2012) from Tallant, K. (2012).
- 6 Tyler, J. H. (2005).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Foster, M. M., Strawn, J., and Duke-Benfield, A. E. (2011).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Boston Private Industry Council. (2014).
- 11 Tyler, J. H. (2005).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Bloom, D., Thompson, S. L., and Ivry, R. (2010).
- 14 Bloom, D., Thompson, S. L., and Ivry, R. (2010); Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008); Colorado Children's Campaign. (2012); Corcoran, M., Hanleybrown, F., Steinberg, A., and Tallant, K. (2012); Foley, R. M. and Pang, L. S. (2006); Martin, V. and Broadus, J. (2013).
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008); National League of Cities. (2007).
- 17 Bridgeland, J. (2012)
- 18 U.S. Congressional Research Service. (2009) from Bridgeland, J. (2012).
- 19 Bridgeland, J. (2012)
- 20 United States Government Accountability Office. (February 2008); National Compadres Network/National Latino Fatherhood and Family Institute. (2012); Hageage, A. (2011).
- 21 Steele, C.M. and Aronson, J. (1995).
- 22 Foster, M. M., Strawn, J., and Duke-Benfield, A. E. (2011).
- 23 Corcoran, M., Hanleybrown, F., Steinberg, A., and Tallant, K. (2012); Martin, V., and Broadus, J. (2013); Rutschow, E., and Cray-Ross, S. (2014).
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Garvey, J. and Grobe, T. (2011).
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Garvey, J. and Grobe, T. (2011); United States Government Accountability Office. (February 2008).
- 28 Corcoran, M., Hanleybrown, F., Steinberg, A., and Tallant, K. (2012).
- 29 Nelson, J. (2011); Dion, M. R. (2013).
- 30 Nelson, J. (2011); Bridgeland, J. and Milano, J. (2012); Martin, N. and Samuel, H. (2006).
- 31 Martin, V. and Broadus, J. (2013).
- 32 Foster, M. M., Strawn, J., and Duke-Benfield, A. E. (2011).
- 33 Garvey, J. and Grobe, T. (2011).
- 34 Martin, V. and Broadus, J. (2013).
- 35 Boston Private Industry Council. (2014).
- 36 Bloom, D., Thompson, S. L., and Ivry, R. (2010).
- 37 Dion, M. R. (2013).
- 38 Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008).
- 39 Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008); Colorado Children's Campaign. (2012); Dion, M. R. (2013); Martin, V. and Broadus, J. (2013); Rutschow, E., and Cray-Ross, S. (2014); Ziegler, M. and Ebert, O. (2003).
- 40 Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008); Martin, V. and Broadus, J. (2013); Rutschow, E., and Cray-Ross, S. (2014); Ziegler, M. and Ebert, O. (2003).

- 41 Martin, V. and Broadus, J. (2013).
- 42 Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008); Colorado Children's Campaign. (2012) Dion, M. R. (2013); Martin, V. and Broadus, J. (2013); Rutschow, E., and Crary-Ross, S. (2014); Ziegler, M. and Ebert, O. (2003).
- 43 Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008); Martin, V. and Broadus, J. (2013); Nelson, J. (2011).
- 44 Garvey, J. and Grobe, T. (2011).
- 45 Garvey, J. and Grobe, T. (2011); Fein, D. (2012).
- 46 Garvey, J. and Grobe, T. (2011); Rutschow, E., and Crary-Ross, S. (2014).
- 47 Corcoran, M., Hanleybrown, F., Steinberg, A., and Tallant, K. (2012); Foster, M. M., Strawn, J., and Duke-Benfield, A. E. (2011); Martin, V. and Broadus, J. (2013); Nelson, J. (2011).
- 48 Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008); Foster, M. M., Strawn, J., and Duke-Benfield, A. E. (2011); Rutschow, E., and Crary-Ross, S. (2014).
- 49 Colorado Children's Campaign. (2012); Dion, M. R. (2013); Heinrich, C. J., and Holzer, H. J. (2010); Nelson, J. (2011); Ziegler, M. and Ebert, O. (2003).
- 50 Fein, D. (2012).
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Garvey, J. and Grobe, T. (2011).
- 53 Fein, D. (2012).
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008); Corcoran, M., Hanleybrown, F., Steinberg, A., and Tallant, K. (2012); Nelson, J. (2011).
- 56 Garvey, J. and Grobe, T. (2011).
- 57 Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008).
- 58 Colorado Children's Campaign. (2012); Corcoran, M., Hanleybrown, F., Steinberg, A., and Tallant, K. (2012); Dion, M. R. (2013); National League of Cities. (2007); Nelson, J. (2011); Ziegler, M. and Ebert, O. (2003).
- 59 Colorado Children's Campaign. (2012); Dion, M. R. (2013). Fein, D. (2012).
- 60 Bridgeland, J. M., and Milano, J. A. (2012); Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008); Nelson, J. (2011).
- 61 Fein, D. (2012).
- 62 Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008); Corcoran, M., Hanleybrown, F., Steinberg, A., and Tallant, K. (2012).
- 63 Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008).
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Nelson, J. (2011); Dion, M. R. (2013).
- 66 Dion, M. R. (2013).
- 67 Nelson, J. (2011).
- 68 Dion, M. R. (2013).
- 69 Nelson, J. (2011).
- 70 Martin, V. and Broadus, J. (2013).
- 71 Fein, D. (2012).
- 72 Dion, M. R. (2013).
- 73 Fein, D. (2012).
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008); Corcoran, M., Hanleybrown, F., Steinberg, A., and Tallant, K. (2012); Foster, M. M., Strawn, J., and Duke-Benfield, A. E. (2011); Martin, V. and Broadus, J. (2013); Rutschow, E., and Crary-Ross, S. (2014).
- 76 Fein, D. (2012).
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Alssid, J. L., Gruber, D., and Mazzeo, C. (2000).
- 79 Bloom, D., Thompson, S. L., and Ivry, R. (2010); Brinson, D., Hassel, B., and Rosch, J. (2008); Corcoran, M., Hanleybrown, F., Steinberg, A., and Tallant, K. (2012); Fein, D. (2012).
- 80 Garvey, J. and Grobe, T. (2011).
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2014); United States Census Bureau. (2014).
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Boston Redevelopment Authority. (2014); Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2014); United States Census Bureau. (2014).
- 86 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2013).

## Research conducted and brief produced by the RENNIE CENTER for Education Research & Policy

Nina Culbertson, *Senior Research Associate*

Jennifer Poulos, *Research Director*

Chad d'Entremont, Ph.D., *Executive Director*



114 State Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02109

### Editorial consultant

Katie Bayerl

### Design services

Lazar Design

### Support for this project provided by

The Hyams Foundation, Inc.

### Acknowledgements

The Rennie Center would like to express its gratitude to the educators and civic leaders in the communities of Greenfield, New Bedford, and Roxbury for their participation in this study. We are grateful for their time, candor, and commitment to sharing what they have learned for the sake of other practitioners serving opportunity youth. We would also like to recognize and thank our contributors to this project. We are grateful to The Hyams Foundation—particularly Nahir Torres and Angela Brown—for providing valuable support and feedback through all phases of this project. Finally, we appreciate the work of Kimia Mavon, who helped gather information used in this research.

### About the RENNIE CENTER Policy Briefs

In an effort to promote public discourse on educational improvement and to inform policy discussions, the Rennie Center periodically publishes policy briefs, which are broadly disseminated to policymakers and stakeholders in the public, private, nonprofit and media sectors. Policy briefs contain independent research on issues of critical importance to the improvement of public education. Briefs are designed to present policymakers and opinion leaders with just-in-time information to help guide and inform their decisions on key educational issues.

### About the RENNIE CENTER

The Rennie Center mission is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life. For more information, please visit [www.renniecenter.org](http://www.renniecenter.org).

For more information about this policy brief, please contact Nina Culbertson, Senior Research Associate, at [nculbertson@renniecenter.org](mailto:nculbertson@renniecenter.org).

### Suggested Citation

Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (November 2014). *Creating Pathways to Success for Opportunity Youth: Lessons from Three Massachusetts Communities*. Boston, MA: Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy.