



# Building a Regional System to Reconnect Opportunity Youth

## DRAFT ACTION PLAN

Every year, over 2,000 young people in our region leave high school without a diploma. Many of those who do finish high school do not successfully transition into postsecondary education or living-wage work. We estimate that as many as 20,000 16-24 year olds in the Road Map Region – South Seattle and South King County – are currently disconnected from school and work. We refer to this group as “opportunity youth” given their positive aspirations and the lost potential they represent should we fail to act.

Failing to invest in opportunity youth is exponentially more costly than providing services to meet their needs.<sup>i</sup> Our region is fast growing, a major job producer and among the best educated in the nation. Yet three out of four degree holders are imported from out of state, and many youth who grow up right here lack a decent shot at participating in our robust economy. And the stakes are getting higher: by 2018, an estimated 63% of jobs will require postsecondary education.<sup>ii</sup> As demand for educational attainment increases, need is growing steadily. In 2012, 58% of students in the Road Map Region qualified for free or reduced lunch, and mobility rates are high, especially among the poor. Unacceptable opportunity gaps must be addressed.

Dropout prevention and intervention are critical, and important work in both areas is underway across districts, schools and community organizations in our region. We have good reason to believe that these and other efforts underway across the cradle-to-career continuum will help *prevent* young people from experiencing disconnection in the first place, which is of course a priority. Our focus here is on *re-engagement*. If the Road Map Project is to meet its bold 2020 goals – doubling the number of young people in the region who are on track for a college or career credential and closing opportunity gaps for low income students and students of color, we must ask ourselves: For those youth who fall through the cracks, what must we do to ensure they get back on track?

*“We are young,  
misunderstood  
and judged by our  
appearances.  
We are resilient,  
overcoming  
adversity, and want  
to succeed.”*

*– King County Youth  
Advisory Council*

### What do we know about our region’s Opportunity Youth?

*Scale of the challenge.* Of the nearly 100,000 young people ages 16-24 living in our region, it is likely that 20 percent, or *one in five*, are currently disconnected from school and living-wage work. This includes an estimated 15,000 who left the K-12 system without graduating, but also thousands of young adults who completed high school but have yet to connect to postsecondary education or living-wage employment.

*Disproportionality.* Most children in the Road Map Region are non-white, and most are poor. Because closing the opportunity gap is a primary goal of the Road Map Project, it is important to underscore that some youth are much more likely to leave high school without graduating than others. For example Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Island students, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian or Alaskan Native students have dropout rates around twice those of Asian and White students. English Language Learners (ELL) and students qualifying for free/reduced lunch leave school at nearly twice the rates of non-ELL and non-FRPL students, respectively. Homeless students leave school at more than twice the rate of their non-homeless peers. Special education students and males also leave at higher rates.<sup>iii</sup> Other sub-groups such as foster youth, court-involved and undocumented youth are also over-represented in the opportunity youth population and therefore warrant deeper attention and/or specialized re-engagement pathways. Information about these groups can be difficult to access and is tracked by different systems using different methodologies.

*Barriers.* Opportunity youth face a complex range of assets and challenges. Many have urgent needs related to basic stabilization, physical and mental health and other challenging life circumstances. Many are involved with the juvenile justice or foster care systems. Many need specialized academic and social support. In youth-led focus groups conducted in 2012, local youth emphasized a range of barriers including: lack of awareness of programs, lack of access (safety, transportation, cost, legal status, child care, language and scheduling), lack of support at school, lack of trust, competing priorities and negative labels.<sup>iv</sup> Addressing these barriers and understanding young people’s interests and strengths is essential to effective re-engagement.

## **What do we know about the current re-engagement landscape?**

The Road Map Region is home to a patchwork of alternative schools, re-engagement programs, community college offerings and employment training programs. Both the K-12 and community college systems offer “second-chance” options for opportunity youth. *District-operated alternative schools* or programs for students who are credit deficient or otherwise off-track exist in all seven Road Map districts, but they vary significantly in terms of eligibility, capacity and offerings. Avenues for *high school completion at community and technical colleges* also exist around the region but these too vary widely in terms of eligibility, capacity and offerings. Some but not all include wrap-around supports like case management, tutoring and work readiness training; without these many opportunity youth are unlikely to be successful.

*Community-based re-engagement options* also exist and are currently expanding, thanks to Washington State’s Open Doors<sup>v</sup> policy. In conducting a scan of these programs, we found more of the variation and fragmentation mentioned above. Specifically, we found that:

- **Demand outpaces supply.** A point-in-time estimate suggests there are roughly 1,700 re-engagement seats across our region for opportunity youth who did not finish high school. Programs included in this count offer one or more high school completion options, case management and some attempt to intentionally bridge students to postsecondary or career pathways. While 1,700 seats is significant, most programs average 18 months to two years for completion and on average, over 2,200 youth leave school every year without graduating.

- **Geographic gaps exist.** As is the case in many other human services sectors, there are more re-engagement programs in Seattle than in South King County, and transportation is a significant barrier for many youth. Some high schools where significant numbers of youth drop out have no re-engagement programs in close proximity.
- **Few programs target the “hardest to serve” youth.** Current programs fill to capacity with relatively limited recruitment, and outreach to the most disconnected youth is rare. Furthermore, after screening for motivation, most programs enroll a subset of youth who initially express interest. Though understandable, many youth remain left out and will likely require more intentional outreach efforts or on-ramps to successfully be re-engaged.
- **Few programs target opportunity youth with a high school credential.** For students who complete K-12 but do not enroll directly in postsecondary education, few supports or programs exist to help connect them with college or career pathways. And if they do find their way into a postsecondary program, their chances of completing a credential without intentional support are limited.
- **There is potential for specialization.** Few programs offer tailored approaches or supports for youth with specific interests or needs. Research suggests that when programs try to serve any/all opportunity youth, they tend to do well with those facing the fewest barriers, but not necessarily other sub-groups. A regional approach that capitalizes on the unique expertise of different local partners could result in a diverse set of pathways that reflects the needs, interests and life circumstances of opportunity youth in our region.
- **Few pathways integrate education with employment.** In focus groups youth consistently underscore the need for education pathways that are connected to jobs and careers. Given that financial needs sometimes must take priority over academic goals, it is important to ensure flexibility and integrated options to “earn and learn” are available across the re-engagement system. Though some re-engagement pathways offer both education and employment supports, more intentionally linked pathways and increased access to paid work experiences are needed.
- **Coordination is lacking.** Assessing the programmatic landscape is challenging given there is no coordinating entity, system, web site or directory (something youth, parents and service providers consistently say is a need). While many program staff are aware of other programs, there is no network of re-engagement providers. This makes it difficult for youth and families to learn about and connect with options and means that individual programs may provide services that if pursued collaboratively, might be more effective and could lead to regional economies of scale.
- **Evidence of effectiveness is limited and inconsistent.** Programs measure persistence differently, target different outcomes and define success differently. Success can mean a young person passed the GED; earned a high school diploma; applied for, enrolled in or persisted in postsecondary education; earned a postsecondary credential or gained employment. This lack of consensus about outcomes hinders our ability to uniformly understand program outcomes and assess effectiveness. Though some programs track similar data, few have had the resources to pursue rigorous evaluation.
- **Connections to postsecondary education are inconsistent.** As mentioned above, different programs focus on different outcomes. Many offer some type of support or referrals related to postsecondary awareness or access. However as postsecondary education becomes increasingly important to participation in the labor market, all re-engagement pathways should include intentional connections to college or career credentials.

## What do we know about effective practice?

*“The most important thing is working with staff we can trust, who care and understand where we’re coming from, who encourage us and remind us we can do it and respect us for our life circumstances.”*

*– King County Youth Advisory Council member*

Though rigorous research about effective programs for opportunity youth remains limited, promising practices based on research, practitioner expertise, youth expertise and other communities working on re-engagement can inform our work at both the program and system levels. The following features are important to effectively reconnect opportunity youth to college or career pathways<sup>vi</sup>:

Program-level features	System-level features
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive relationships with caring adults</li> <li>• Strengths-based, youth-centered intake, assessment and planning</li> <li>• Accessibility and flexibility</li> <li>• Commitment to equity &amp; cultural competence</li> <li>• High expectations and clear structure</li> <li>• Relevant, career-oriented curriculum</li> <li>• Employment opportunities</li> <li>• Wrap-around support services</li> <li>• Postsecondary navigation support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networked portfolio of learning options</li> <li>• Shared, actionable data that can drive program improvement and policy change</li> <li>• Advocacy and sustainable financing</li> <li>• Lead entity or partnership charged with driving agenda and coordinating resources</li> <li>• System-wide commitment to quality and outcomes</li> </ul>

## Developing a regional action plan

A broad group of stakeholders (see page 5) came together between December 2013 and June 2014 to learn about the scale of this problem, discuss the needs of our communities and develop a regional action plan. The group came to several key conclusions: programs exist but they are fragmented, hard for youth to find, capacity and evidence of effectiveness are limited and uneven across the region, and connections to postsecondary pathways are not as strong as they could be.

The group concluded that the Road Map Region needs ***a robust, coordinated, diverse system of re-engagement pathways designed to help youth and young adults reconnect to education and progress toward a college or career credential and living wage work.*** Building a re-engagement system will require collaborative work toward four goals: improving supply, coordination, quality and access.

In each of these four goal areas, the work group used criteria<sup>vii</sup> to identify a limited number of *high-leverage strategies* we feel are necessary to make progress. Each strategy is broken down into specific activities, and for each strategy an initial set of key stakeholders has been identified. The activities included in the plan reflect the Road Map Project's theory of change which emphasizes aligned action, data, community engagement, and system-building. Work is now underway to develop more specific timelines and work teams as we transition from planning to implementation. System-building is complicated work and we fully expect the specifics to evolve and change over time. We hope this plan can guide work over the coming 2-3 years, but we see it as a living document and expect it will need to be refreshed and revised at least annually.

## **Opportunity Youth Work Group Members**

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**Jill Patnode**, Puget Sound Educational Service District  
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**Laurie Bohm**, White Center Community Development Association  
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**Mary Jean Ryan**, Community Center for Education Results  
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**Melissa Ford Shah**, Department of Social and Health Services, RDA  
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# Opportunity Youth Action Plan

*The focus of the Opportunity Youth Action Plan is building a robust, coordinated, diverse system of re-engagement pathways designed to help youth and young adults reconnect to education and progress towards a college or career credential and living wage work.*

## Goal 1: Improve the SUPPLY of re-engagement pathways in the Road Map Region

Strategies	Support the development and expansion of pathways	Align and improve district credit retrieval practices & policies
<b>Collective Activities</b>  <b>Backbone Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess regional re-engagement “system” for balance (e.g., geography, youth needs) and identify gaps</li> <li>• Work with district, college and community-based organization (CBO) leads to support pathway start-up and expansion, including on-ramps to existing pathways</li> <li>• Identify companion funding for Open Doors</li> <li>• Advocate for improvements to state Open Doors program</li> <li>• Develop re-engagement cost models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document credit retrieval policies and practices across region</li> <li>• Identify and share promising practices</li> <li>• Standardize effective policies and practices as much as possible across districts</li> <li>• Coordinate with Early Warning Action Team and other relevant groups</li> </ul>
<b>Primary Stakeholders</b>	K-12, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), CBOs, Youth, CTCs, Workforce system, King County, Philanthropy	K-12 Districts, PSESD, foster youth-serving organizations

## Goal 2: Increase COORDINATION of re-engagement pathways in the Road Map Region

Strategies	Establish a shared vision for re-engagement in our region	Identify and develop shared structures that link pathways into a system
<b>Collective Activities</b>  <b>Backbone Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a shared framework for the range of desired pathways and key features of effective pathways</li> <li>• Ensure key features (e.g., peer advocacy, wrap-around services, work experience) are part of all pathways</li> <li>• Ensure all pathways offer or link to college/career credentials</li> <li>• Advocate for policies that enable blended funding</li> <li>• Develop buy-in to the shared framework across providers</li> <li>• Coordinate framework development, review and communications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify areas where shared structures or joint functions might help (e.g., intake, outreach, data, enrollment)</li> <li>• Pilot shared structures and review results</li> <li>• Encourage adoption of shared practices and necessary organizational changes</li> <li>• Facilitate and staff a community of practice for re-engagement providers</li> <li>• Coordinate and communicate as necessary</li> <li>• Update and engage Puget Sound Coalition for College and Career Readiness</li> </ul>
<b>Primary Stakeholders</b>	Re-engagement providers (K-12, CBOs, Colleges, Youth, Workforce system, King County)	Re-engagement provider leads (e.g., CBOs, K-12, Colleges, King County) and potential partners e.g., OSPI, PSESD; Philanthropy

### Goal 3: Improve the QUALITY of re-engagement pathways in the Road Map Region

<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Develop shared continuous quality improvement tools &amp; processes</b>	<b>Monitor system reach and outcomes</b>
<b>Collective Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify/develop a framework and accompanying tools for quality re-engagement practice</li> <li>Secure professional development on quality practice for re-engagement staff</li> <li>Develop buy-in to a shared quality framework and process for collecting and using data for improvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify key system outcomes</li> <li>Identify data needed to monitor outcomes</li> <li>Review data on participation and outcomes to inform system design and performance</li> <li>Monitor Road Map indicators to see if youth needs are changing</li> </ul>
<b>Backbone Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitate and staff a community of practice for re-engagement providers</li> <li>Work in partnership with programs to develop tools and processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitate access to data for advisory group to monitor</li> </ul>
<b>Primary Stakeholders</b>	K-12, PSESD, CBOs, Colleges, OSPI, Youth, Research Partners	K-12, OSPI, CBOs, Colleges, Research Partners

### Goal 4: Increase AWARENESS of and ACCESS to re-engagement pathways and system

<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Develop mechanism(s) to reach out to students quickly when they leave school or college without finishing</b>	<b>Develop regional youth-led outreach strategies</b>
<b>Collective Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Document current practices within the region for reaching out to students who have left without finishing</li> <li>Identify and share promising practices</li> <li>Explore potential economies of scale for regionalizing this function and where it might be housed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a directory of re-engagement pathways that is accessible and updated regularly</li> <li>Design compelling communications and community engagement activities that raise awareness and build urgency</li> <li>Implement youth-led peer outreach to raise awareness and connect youth to pathways</li> </ul>
<b>Backbone Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coordinate with Early Warning Action Team, regional data portal project and other relevant groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coordinate and communicate as necessary</li> </ul>
<b>Primary Stakeholders</b>	K-12 Districts, Colleges, potential partner organizations	Youth, K-12, OSPI, CBOs, Colleges, SOAR, 211, other community partners

# Opportunity Youth Action Plan Logic Model (in development)

Goals & Strategies	Short-Term Outcomes	Short-Term Indicators	Long-Term Outcomes	Long-Term Indicators
<p><b>Improve the SUPPLY of Re-engagement Pathways</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support the development and expansion of pathways</li> <li>Align and improve district credit retrieval practices &amp; policies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gap between supply and demand is reduced</li> <li>Geographic gaps are reduced</li> <li>Overall system/menu includes more specialization</li> <li>More off-track students who attempt credit retrieval are successful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase in annual re-engagement slots</li> <li>Increased slots in S. King County</li> <li>Increase in pathways targeting youth with HS credential</li> <li>Increase in pathways targeting higher need youth</li> <li>Increase in pathways integrating education and employment</li> <li>% of students who succeed in retrieving credits</li> </ul>	<p>Increased re-enrollment in education</p> <p>Increase in HS completion/ equivalency</p>	
<p><b>Increase COORDINATION of Re-engagement Pathways</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish a shared, regional vision for re-engagement</li> <li>Identify and develop shared structures that link pathways into a system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Active network of re-engagement providers</li> <li>Provider activities change to better align with network goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li># and type of members in provider network</li> <li># of providers that agree to refer youth to other pathways</li> <li># of providers collaborating on outreach</li> </ul>	<p>Increased in postsecondary enrollment</p>	
<p><b>Improve the QUALITY of Re-engagement Pathways</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop shared continuous quality improvement tools &amp; processes</li> <li>Monitor system reach, quality and outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providers participate in quality assessment and improvement</li> <li>Pathways include key components (e.g., peer advocacy, work experience)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li># of providers regularly assessing and reviewing quality data</li> <li># of pathways that include key components</li> </ul>	<p>Increase in postsecondary progress</p> <p>Increased postsecondary completion rates</p>	
<p><b>Increase AWARENESS of and ACCESS to Re-engagement Pathways</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop mechanisms to reach out to students quickly when they leave school or college without finishing</li> <li>Develop regional youth-led outreach strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students who leave high school without finishing are proactively offered options and support to re-engage</li> <li>Students who leave college without a credential are proactively offered options and support to return</li> <li>Increased re-enrollment rates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li># of students re-engaged within six months of leaving</li> <li>% of community college students who return after leaving</li> <li># of youth re-enrolling</li> </ul>		

ROAD MAP 2020 GOAL

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- <sup>i</sup> Hamilton, K., Sullivan, N., Bundy, A., & Fersh, L. (2006). Too big to be seen: The invisible dropout crisis in Boston and America. Boston Youth Transitions Task Force. Retrieved from: [http://www.bostonpic.org/sites/default/files/resources/too\\_big\\_to\\_be\\_seen.pdf](http://www.bostonpic.org/sites/default/files/resources/too_big_to_be_seen.pdf)
- <sup>ii</sup> Carnevale, P. A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). "Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018." Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. Retrieved from :<https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/ursjbxaym2np1v8mgrv7>
- <sup>iii</sup> Cite Alessandra's technical write up on OY data
- <sup>iv</sup> SOAR focus group (citation?)
- <sup>v</sup> <https://www.k12.wa.us/GATE/SupportingStudents/StudentRetrieval.aspx>
- <sup>vi</sup> Bloom, D., Thompson, S., & Ivry, R. (2010). Building a Learning Agenda Around Disconnected Youth. MDRC. Retrieved from: [http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/building\\_learning\\_agenda\\_around\\_disconnected\\_fr.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/building_learning_agenda_around_disconnected_fr.pdf). Martin, N., & Halperin, S. (2006). Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth. American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved from: <http://www.aypf.org/publications/WhateverItTakes/WITfull.pdf>. Reconnecting Youth through Dropout Reengagement Centers. (2013). National League of Cities. Retrieved from: [http://www.nlc.org/Documents/Find%20City%20Solutions/IYEF/Education/Final\\_YEF\\_DropoutReengagementMAG2013.pdf](http://www.nlc.org/Documents/Find%20City%20Solutions/IYEF/Education/Final_YEF_DropoutReengagementMAG2013.pdf).
- <sup>vii</sup> Strategy selection criteria included: Will the strategy serve as a starting point for systems-level change? Can the strategy benefit from collaboration – geographic or across the continuum? Does the strategy have the potential to move one or more indicators at scale? Is there research supporting its potential impact? Does it have the potential to make progress quickly and build on existing momentum? Is there a potential lead organization or individual with the commitment and capacity to implement? Is there potential to make progress quickly?