

# **Generation Work Young Adult Interview Summary: Reasons for Dropping out and Reengaging in K-12 and GED Programs**

## **I. Introduction**

SkillUp Washington, a workforce funder collaborative at the Seattle Foundation, is supporting local efforts which connect young adults to good jobs and career pathways in King County. SkillUp regularly convenes Generation Work partners to share what they are learning and brainstorm ways to align, coordinate and leverage resources. These activities are partially funded through the Annie E. Casey Foundation multi-year Generation Work initiative, which is dedicated to increasing access to good jobs and careers for young adults and connecting employers to talent pipelines.

As part of Generation Work, SkillUp engaged Business Government Community Connections (BGCC) to interview young adults served by Generation Work partners. The interviews garner young adult feedback about their experiences prior, during and after receiving services into Generation Work learning community meetings and planning. Results are shared to ensure young adult voice informs the work of all partners.

As of September 1, 2017, 42 young adults, 18-29 years of age responded to telephone interviews, ranging from 25 minutes to 120 minutes (averaging 57 minutes). Interviews were conducted at different times, including weekends and evenings to accommodate different schedules and preferences of young adults. The interviewees include young adults working with staff at King County's Employment and Education Resources Reconnect to Opportunity (ReOpp) program, enrolled in aviation and airport-related training at Port Jobs and in entry-level manufacturing training at South Seattle College's Georgetown campus, Renton Technical College and Everett Community College.

The report examines the reasons young adults transition to and from K-12 and GED programs and shares their observations about successful re-engagement strategies. This report is part of a series highlighting young adult experiences and observations about strategies connecting young adults to education and employment pathways. The reports are shared with Generation Work partners to advance system reform strategies that improve the experiences of young adults who desire to access pathways to good jobs and careers.

## **II. Main Findings**

### **Number of Youth Transitions to and From K-12 and GED Programs**

Twenty-four of the 42 youth/young adults dropped out of middle school or high school at some point, posing a high cost to youth and educational programs. Eighteen had earned a high school degree, and had not dropped out of school at any point. A more detailed look at the 24 young adults with a history of dropping out of middle or high school, and data for GED attenders shows that:

- ✓ Two dropped out of middle school in eighth grade and neither continued to high school.
- ✓ Twenty-two dropped out of high school at least once, and twelve eventually graduated.
- ✓ Twelve enrolled in GED programs; and eight later earned their GED. (The total number of enrollments in GED for the 12 students was 33 – as many frequently started and exited GED programs before completing).
- ✓ Four had not earned a high school degree or GED at the time of the interview; all reported they were planning to pursue some type of next step education in the near future due to interactions with Generation Work-connected providers.

## Reasons for Dropping out of K-12 programs

**Discrete family/personal events** were the main reason for two-thirds of the young adults dropping out of the above programs. These included in order of frequency, highest to lowest:

- ✓ Family moves, due to homelessness, kinship care and foster care changes
- ✓ Juvenile Justice or Department of Corrections involvement
- ✓ Family health issues (requiring the young person to care for relatives, including young siblings, and in some cases elderly relatives)
- ✓ Need to work to support the family (because of family illness, parent incarceration, rent increases)
- ✓ Pregnancy
- ✓ Lack of motivation to overcome academic challenges, especially in the area of math

**Education-focused problems** were the reason for one-third of the young adults dropping out of the above programs. These included in order of frequency, highest to lowest:

- ✓ Course failures
- ✓ Sense that education is irrelevant (curriculum, courses, likely results, etc.)
- ✓ Expulsions
- ✓ Suspensions
- ✓ Conflicts with peers
- ✓ Conflicts with instructors (largely attributed to discrimination, lack of cultural

understanding)

- ✓ Perception (and more accurately “evidence” as young adult said) that the school “does not want them back”

A closer look shows that the small group of young adults (n=4) who did not graduate from high school or GED programs at the time of the interview were more likely to have experienced a *combination of discrete and education-focused problems* when enrolled in K-12, and all had a history of *frequent absenteeism beginning in elementary school*. One of these young adults had participated in a 3 month in-patient treatment program, noting that there was no connection between the program and next steps education planning. Another had been homeless and decided to leave her home rather than go to “yet another” temporary shelter with her mother. Even though school bus transportation was able to transport her from her new out of district location to her original school, the distance from her shelter residence kept her away from her old friends. She returned to her original community, couch surfed with some for short periods of time, while trying to stay in school. When their families grew tired of the arrangement, she experienced bouts of homelessness, living in a tent with “whoever.” Another enrolled briefly in Job Corps and dropped out, and the last, who had lived in an out of kinship and foster care, and was briefly engaged in the Department of Social & Health Services Transitional Living Program but dropped out because “I was sick of their stupid rules.”

## Perception of Stepping out of School

A deeper look reveals that almost 60% of the students did not describe their situation as one in which they “dropped out”, but rather as one in which they “stepped out” or “stopped out” of school, as one young adult put it: “To get some things in order”. One student described his home situations as being “not compatible with school”, and as being “focused on survival – today – not on my life tomorrow.” Most noted, that school faculty were unaware of their family situations, even though they were frequently absent.

## Reasons for Returning and Staying in High School

This review also shows that the youth and young adults who returned to high school and stayed to graduate largely attributed this positive outcome to the following types of interventions:

- ✓ **High school faculty and teachers who welcomed young adults back and provided extra counseling and advising support.** One young adult who had been in short term detention for three weeks said that the school counselor stayed in contact with him and dropped off assignments “so I would not be too far behind.” He also noted that, “I learned more in detention school than I had ever learned in

regular high school, because I got more attention, and did not have so many opportunities to get distracted by other students of my family dramas. When I got back to school I got connected to tutoring so I could keep getting this kind of assistance.”

- ✓ **High school courses which challenge students, and don't assume because they dropped out they don't want to learn.** Four high school students who returned to high school and later graduated say they did this because they got to complete college level courses [i.e. dual enrollment] while enrolled in career technical education-focused classes in high school. All were self-described “non-academics”, and as more “hand on” learners. Their comments also illustrated the importance of engaging students who don't thrive as well in mainstream classes in education programs which tie coursework to future career goals. Unfortunately, at their high schools only two of these students received post-secondary planning services to continue building on these successes.
- ✓ **High school teachers who provided young adults with opportunities to re-take tests, and make up late assignments.** “It took me a while to get back into school. The fact that a couple of my teachers gave me a chance to redo my work was a deal breaker and gave me a chance to succeed.”

## Reasons for Returning and Staying in GED Programs

This review also shows that the young adults who returned to GED programs and ended up earning a GED attributed this positive outcome to the following types of interventions:

- ✓ **Teachers who act like this is *their* second chance to teach us, rather than second, third, or fourth chance for young adults to do better.** A young adult who said she went to a “dismal, low-income school in a poverty neighborhood” explained, “It helps when teachers act like they are the ones ready to change so that we will want to learn. The first thing that my GED instructor said is, ‘I am going to make this a place where you will want to learn and succeed.’ That made me want to be there.”
- ✓ **Teachers who try first to find out what young adults are interested in and good at before tackling what they don't know.** One young adult said, “I am bad at math, good at making things, and not that great at all the history stuff. So my instructor had me practice a bunch of math and writing in a project she gave me researching something I like (robots and artificial intelligence). She told me maybe I would like to work in aircraft design someday and had me research

careers. Following her suggestion I stopped thinking I was taking a GED class and instead thought of it as an “Entry to aerospace class.”

- ✓ **GED courses which offer onsite childcare.** One young adult who had left school when she was pregnant in her senior year said that the on- site childcare was the main reason she could successfully take a GED course. “I finished fast, and it made it really easy for me to study and be able to pick up my daughter. I also had more time to be with my daughter because I was not on the bus going to get her.”
- ✓ **GED courses which position the GED as a springboard to future work and or school activities.** Young adults were particularly positive about programs which incorporate the development of career plans and products such as portfolios and resumes.

### Hindsight Reflections of Young Adults – Underscore System Challenges

Young Adults identified the following *system* challenges:

- ✓ **Five school youth who were suspended, expelled or in short-term detention did not receive home, school or court-based services that helped them stay engaged in school, and many felt they were not really welcome back to the school.** One said, “On my first day back after a 14 day expulsion, my language arts teacher said, now you are even more behind. Good luck.” Another student said that the only reason she returned to *any* school, rather than dropping out, was because someone at detention referred her to a GED program instead because they knew that her old school “was not so up on me returning, which I kinda get.” This young adult said that more attention needs to be paid on ensuring that *all* young adults get enrolled in the best school program for them, which may likely not be the same as their original pre-detention school. Yet another student said, “The detention school class was not focused on what my school class was. They had some kind of class, and it was okay, but not what I needed to stay up on my school work.”
- ✓ **Four high school youth who changed schools or moved frequently, said that their transcripts and records were frequently incomplete, requiring frequent visits to the office, or calls to their home.** “I felt like schools were taking their frustration out on me, when I just had a crazy family life.” Two young adults said that the school office staff were the main reason they left school. “They were always on me about information I don’t even know about. They weren’t nice to my mom either.”

- ✓ **Two young adults said that their problems at home often went unnoticed at school.** One said, "First I would be absent a few days a month, then week, and it got to the point I knew I would never catch up." Another recalled, "Sometimes teachers would say, nice of you to visit today. But only one asked me why I was gone [Because my mother went to jail and I was babysitting my two year old sister]. She referred me to a counselor who was nice but did not seem to have any time to help."

### III. Summary

Young Adult comments suggest that strategies to reduce the number of Opportunity Youth and Young Adults need to begin in the K-12 system. The high cost of dropping out and returning to school was dramatically illustrated during many of the interviews, pointing to the need for:

- ✓ stronger school-based early alert systems that identify students in crisis and provide related guidance and tutoring support, and opportunities to re-take tests and redo assignments;
- ✓ sensitivity training for all school staff, including office staff to support young adults and their families who are confronting difficult circumstances, and may not be capable to negotiate complicated bureaucracies;
- ✓ coordinated detention and school-based services to keep students engaged in appropriate education programs given their needs and the receptiveness of their original school to their returning;
- ✓ exit and discharge planning for young adults exiting detention and treatment programs, ideally linking these efforts to mentoring support and more intensive school re-engagement strategies; and
- ✓ GED re-engagement programs which incorporate personalized learning, individual assistance and opportunities for students and advisors to develop and assess learning and career goals together.