

The Youth Transition Funder's Group

# Youth Focus Group Results

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## Issues Impacting Struggling Students and Out-of-School Youth



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with assistance from

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**Acknowledgements:**

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University of Massachusetts's Emerging Leaders

*"I like this program because of one teacher  
who spends time with me  
and cares that I understand the material.  
He motivates me."*



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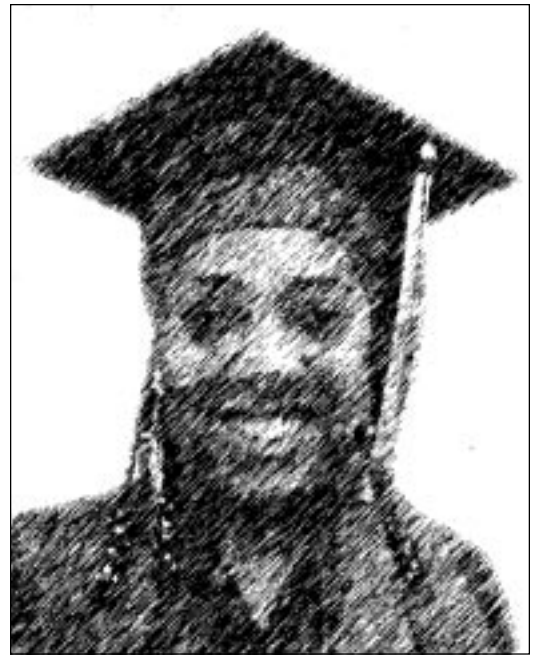
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## Overview

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This focus group report is the product of a multi-partner effort to study how well Boston is serving struggling students and youth who have dropped out. This effort — The Youth Transitions Initiative (YTFG) — is a national multi-city project. It is supported by the Youth Transitions Funder’s Group – a number of national foundations with interest in improving outcomes for urban youth. In Boston, this effort is co-convened by the Boston PIC and the Center for Youth Development and Education at the Commonwealth Corporation.



The overall project work includes data studies on school success, drop outs, and labor market prospects of young adults by education level; an analysis of what services exist to help youth who struggle in school or have dropped out; a look at policies that could be changed or adjusted to better help youth stay in school or get re-connected to outside education programs; and focus group work that explores the perspectives of youth and parents on the issues.<sup>1</sup>



This particular report summarizes and presents the results of youth focus group work. A related document prepared by the Boston Parent Organizing Network presents the responses of Boston area parents and is a companion document to this report.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the youth recruited for the focus groups are struggling in school (although some focus groups were comprised of students doing well in high school) and a majority of these young people have already dropped

out. Of the dropouts, some youth are trying to get re-connected to community-based alternative education or GED programs; some are already in such programs and are back on track or even thriving.

An important purpose of the focus groups was to hear from young people about their education experiences. We wanted to learn more about these specific questions:

- What helps youth stay in school and what causes them to drop out?
- Do young people feel there is enough support for them if they start to have trouble in school?
- Once students drop out, is it easy or difficult to connect with community resources and get back into an educational program?
- How do young people hear about and get connected to outside education and training programs?
- What characteristics of community-based programs enable young people experience success after they have left public high school?
- Do young people have clear and realistic career interests? Do they have career plans that will help them reach their goals?

## **The Focus Group Work**

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A key partner in the overall project is The Youth Service Provider Network (YSPN). YSPN is a group of career education and alternative education and GED program providers in Boston who have been meeting to share referrals and program resources for nearly ten years. YSPN was the lead entity for the youth focus group work. They developed a plan to conduct 10-12 youth focus groups (with at least 10 members per group). Participants were chosen to represent a variety of perspectives and be both in-school and out-of-school youth.

YSPN and partners developed formal protocols for the focus group work using as a guide the Career Center quality review protocols (see attachments). YSPN members served as the lead organizers of the focus groups, outreaching to youth in their particular programs or asking colleagues to pull together youth groups. Emerging Leaders from the University of Massachusetts Boston played instrumental roles, volunteering to facilitate and

document the youth focus group work with assistance from YSPN members and others. The Boston Private Industry Council staff provided training and support for the Emerging Leaders to prepare them for the work. Youth received stipends for participation.

Focus group facilitators were asked to tabulate a number of responses by category, so that the information could be easily accessed in aggregate form for some of the key questions. This would highlight themes that emerged from among the various focus groups. In addition, the facilitators attempted to document exactly what students said in order to more fully understand young people and parents' perceptions about school and community-based program experiences.

In no way, was this work intended to be a representative sample of youth. Instead, it was a way to bring the voices of youth to this work in order to give stakeholders an "inside view" of what helps and hinders some young people's success in high school. Partners created a "wish" list of participants that included young people who were succeeding in high school, had failed MCAS, were drop-outs (not currently connected to a program), were alternative education or GED program participants, were court involved, etc.

## **Demographics of Youth Participating in the Focus Groups**

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The facilitators conducted 13 focus groups and spoke with a total of 118 youth. YSPN, PIC, school staff and others helped organize a variety of groups, representing both in-school and out-of-school youth. So, for example, facilitators talked to middle school youth in a pilot school, youth in a comprehensive high school, young people with criminal justice involvement at the YO, gay and lesbian youth from Boston and local area high schools, youth in community-based alternative programs, etc. The specific demographics of the overall group of youth involved in the project are represented on the next page.

## Demographics of Youth Participating in the Focus Groups

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	#	%
<b>Age</b>		
13-15	15	12.7%
16-18	72	61.0%
19-21	24	20.3%
22-24	7	5.9%
Total	118	

<b>Gender</b>		
Male	70	59.3%
Female	48	40.7%
Total	118	

<b>Ethnicity</b>		
African American	55	45.8%
Asian	5	4.2%
Latino	31	25.8%
Mixed	7	5.8%
White	11	9.2%
Other	11	9.2%
Total	120	

<b>Still in School?</b>		
Yes	36	32.7%
No	74	67.3%
Total	110	



## Summary of Results

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Several themes emerged from the youth focus group work. They were mentioned by both in-school youth and dropouts and represent the main ideas that emerged from conversations with these young people. These themes will be explored in more depth in the following sections of the report and are summarized below:

- Teachers who care about students are key to why youth say they like high school.
- Poor relationships with teachers and impersonal learning environments are frequent reasons why students say they disconnected from high school.
- The pace of instruction—not feeling challenged, falling behind or not being on-track to graduate—are important reasons why youth leave school.
- Peers at high school can create an unsafe or chaotic environment for some students; this seriously interferes with their learning and can cause them to leave high school.
- Personal problems or issues cause youth to leave school.
- Many young people find their way to outside education programs through friends, though school personnel, case managers, clinicians, and parents, as well as posted advertisements also help youth re-connect to programs.
- Strong relationships with teachers and staff and a constructive peer culture are the two components that most help youth persist in and succeed in alternative schools, career development, or GED programs.
- Young people like outside programs because they are small, give students personal attention and allow them to “work at their own pace.”
- Although many students in the focus groups can name a job or career interest (some more realistic than others), many students do not understand how to develop or pursue a career plan.
- A majority of youth in outside programs says that they understand the value of and want to get a good education and are relieved and appreciative about having a second chance to get a high school diploma.

In addition, youth had some advice for adults who work on dropout prevention and alternative education issues. They said that:

- Strengthening teacher/student relationships, improving curriculum content and delivery, and improving support for struggling students would help more youth stay in and succeed in school.
- Investing in more advertising and outreach (including making people who work with youth aware of education and employment programs), would help more young people re-connect to needed services, but personal motivation is an important factor.

## **Perspectives about High School (In-School Youth)**

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Several of the focus groups represented in-school students from comprehensive high schools or BPS pilot schools. One group included middle school youth in order to gain some early perspectives on how younger students view school and how they envision their life as adults. Some of the young people interviewed are currently struggling and some are doing well in school.

### **Teacher, Friends, and Activities: Why Teens Like High School**

Youth who are doing well in the BPS high schools cite “caring teachers” as a key reason they like high school. They say that caring and supportive teachers are one reason they are succeeding in high school. One youth is more specific, saying “you come to school for one teachers or for those few teachers that understand you and try to help you out.” Teens also say that “good friends” and “peers who help each other” are reasons why they like school. Others mention after-school clubs, sports, and music and art programs; some students cite particular classes that they enjoy. One student said he likes Madison Park because the school allows him “to pursue a vocation.” The middle school youth group referenced courses that they liked, but a majority said they liked to come to school for gym or to “play ball.”

### **Poor Relationships and Poor Performance: Why Teens Dislike High School**

The in-school groups also have reasons why they don’t like school. Poor relationships with teachers are a main reason across all the groups. Stu-

dents say many teachers don't care about students, and that they are "just there to pick up a paycheck." Others say that teachers don't respect students or they are "indifferent to us." Teacher turnover is one reason some youth don't like school; when teachers leave, say some young people, "the administration doesn't even tell us why they left." One young person declares that "when classes are too big, there is no opportunity to bond with your teacher." Middle school youth say they don't like school rules and school hours.

Other students talk about a culture of low expectations affecting their feelings about high school. One says "all you have to do to pass is show up." Another student comments that "sometimes students are asleep or on their cell phones and teachers act like they don't even notice."

Some groups cite unruly classrooms, aging physical plants, lack of resources (such as books or money for field trips), and long school hours as reasons why they dislike school. Students also say they dislike having too many students in a class and having too few electives or after-school activities. In one group students described what they called a "severe" attendance policy within the system, saying "you fail a class if you have 4 unexcused absences."

### **Struggling Students Don't Get Enough Help**

One group said that there wasn't much help for youth who have trouble in school. They say there are few tutors and that there is "no help for personal problems; only guidance counselors and they are inaccessible." Other groups had mixed opinions, with some young people saying there was help for students who had trouble. Some cite particular programs that they are familiar with. For example, one teen mentioned the work-study program at his high school, saying it was good for students who either needed or wanted to work.<sup>3</sup>

One group of in-school students spoke extensively about support for struggling students, with some saying that "you have to ask around and talk to the right people." Others say that "some students never even see their guidance counselor." One student expressed frustration, stating, "If you miss

one day of school, you are totally lost and you have to go find tutoring outside of school. But the school is supposed to be helping you. The only tutoring available is MCAS, not class work.” It is worth noting that high school youth are able to describe more specifically the problems they are having in high school. Middle school youth in the focus group (many with histories of truancy) express or non-verbally demonstrate their alienation or disengagement with school, but are much less clear or specific about why they are struggling or what would help them re-engage with their education.

### **Some Special Programs Do Help Students Succeed**

Some students are in special programs that they feel are helping them succeed in school. In one focus group, 7 students are in college access programs. Six students are in jobs; these include worksites such as the Boston Bar Association, Judicial Youth Corps and Boston Public Health Commission. All of these students agree that they joined the programs or took jobs for “advice and money.”

In another focus group, students were asked if there were places or programs they could go to get reliable help. These students do, in fact, mention specific programs, usually college access programs as places where they can get help and support for high school work and post-high planning and transition services.

### **Incentives Would Help Younger Youth Succeed in School**

Interestingly, middle school youth say that the best support for helping them stay in and succeed in school is offering more incentives for attendance and participation and having teachers or authority figures (including police) encourage them to come to school.

### **Youth Have Career Interests, But Often Don’t Know How to Plan for a Career**

Many of the youth have career goals. In one focus group, nine youth had career goals and all had plans for after graduation. These include college, nurses training and business programs. Students describe family member’s jobs as influencing them both positively and negatively. One teenager men-

tions that his mother is a doctor and all she does is work; he doesn't want to do the same. Others cite relative's success with certain fields, such as plumbing or engineering. Students also say that jobs they have in high school influence their career goals. They say what influences their decisions to pursue a field or endeavor is "money" or "a passion for the work."

Youth tend to have more focused and realistic career interests as they get older, although this varies from group to group. Among the middle school students, career interests ranged from "an NBA basketball player and a DJ" or "doctor or lawyer," to "a forensic science lab specialist and teacher." Among older youth (juniors, seniors and recent graduates), careers goals mentioned are "policy analyst," "audio engineer/production manager," "medical examiner" and "nurse." Some youth focus mostly on going on to school and others are still unsure about specific career directions.

Students are not always clear about the paths to these careers; often they cite general, rather than specific things that will help them reach their goals, such as "family support" or "getting good grades," although others say that "more career related courses" or "more guidance counselors" would help them reach their goals.

## **Perspectives about High School (Out-of-School Youth)**

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Obviously the responses of out-of-school youth are more critical in general than those of in-school youth. It is important to keep in mind that all of these students left the public high school because of problems at school or because of personal problems. All of these youth are speaking about an institution where they experienced failure and a place they eventually left. Some of these young people have re-connected with a youth program and are now doing well. Others have not yet re-connected to an alternative education or GED program and have yet to finish high school.

### **Teachers and Particular Courses: What These Teens Liked About High School**

Some students initially said there was nothing they liked about high school. When pressed, these students say they liked specific teachers or particular

courses. Many had friends in their high school. One young woman said she liked computers and working with the Internet. One young man said he liked the “baseball team.”

### **Teachers and Peers: What They Didn’t Like About High School**

Teachers are cited as an important reason why youth didn’t like high school. One focus group describes teachers’ relationships with students as “adversarial.” One participant thinks “teachers feel aggressive towards their students—you can see the stress on their faces when they walk in the room.” Another youth says “teachers weren’t teaching and teachers don’t care. You could just walk right out of the classroom.”

### **Need for More Academic Challenge**

In one focus group, two students came from outside the Boston Public School system (one from METCO and one from a private school); both transitioned to BPS in the 9th grade. They expressed disappointment with the lack of rigorous academics. One student says that he consistently asked for more challenging work but never got it. “They would tell me to hold out and wait, that it would get harder-it didn’t.” This young person said that he began “hanging out in the hallways and getting into trouble.” He dropped out of school and is now getting a GED.

### **Problems with Peers**

A number of participants in the various groups talked about problems with peers. One teenager says: “In the Boston Public Schools, everyone is trying to be popular. If you chill with the wrong people, you get a bad name.” Another mentions that “other kids in class would be fighting and the teachers did not care and did nothing.”

### **Violence**

Many youth talked about violence at school. Comments include: “students were getting stabbed and shot.” “Everyone is on your case and picking on you.” In one group, youth say that students bring their problems and neighborhood issues into school. These teens voiced their frustration that administrators don’t intervene or intervene ineffectively. One student mentions

that principals don't get enough "safety transfers." She notes that when they do use them, it serves as a quick fix and never really addresses the problems, often not protecting "the right person." Others talk about how they felt compelled to protect themselves. One says "I had no choice but to fight. I have to handle my own."

Police are raised as a contributing factor for dropping out among youth in the YO focus groups, although police were not mentioned by in-school groups. In the YO groups, there is a strong perception that school police are not at school to protect students. One student talked about being harassed by school police on his way to and from school." Another tells this anecdote: "One day a cop said my full name and said 'the only thing that is going to happen to you is you are either going to die in the streets or be locked up forever.'

### **Insufficient Help and Attention**

In one group a student says "teachers don't care about you." The group complains that the top students get all the attention, noting: "they help the ones that get A's and B's. You are asking the teacher for help, then there is this person who gets A's and she comes along and the teacher will help her. They fail to help us." Another adds, "I'm failing and I need help. They fail to recognize us." In another group, a young person says "I was embarrassed to ask for help because some people call you dumb." A student who was an "A" student before dropping out says she didn't experience these problems.

### **Why They Left High School**

Responses to this question varied, with youth highlighting a variety of problems that were educational, emotional, social, and familial, as described above. Students have poor relationships with teachers. They fall behind and can't catch up. They have problems with peers and perceive their learning environments to be chaotic. They experience violence in their schools or neighborhoods. Others experience personal or behavior problems. One dropout says that he was "asked to leave due to fighting." Another youth "got a girl pregnant." One young woman says she was embarrassed due to her pregnancy and other young people say they were "hanging out with the wrong crowd or" "got expelled" or "were arrested."

*"It was boring. The way teachers teach is putting a book in front of you. A lot of teachers don't care anyway."*

**"There is nothing new in any class."**

*"I slept through all my classes after lunch."*

**"I would slack. Out of a month, I would go (to school) a week. The teachers did not really care."**

*"Big classes."*

*"In high school, they pressure you to learn more. [You have to catch up], otherwise you'll stay back. Teachers pressure you."*

**"I fell behind and wasn't even close to graduating."**

*"The other kids in the class would be fighting and the teachers did not care and did nothing. It was like they were just getting paid."*

**"Friends were a distraction."**

*"People at school kept calling me stupid."*

*"I dropped out of school because my mother and sister were sick and I needed to make money."*

**"I dropped out of school because I was hanging with an older crowd. I was 15 and they were 17 and 18."**

*"I dropped out because if you didn't get to school by 7:30 you needed your parent with you and my mother was at work."*

## **Connecting with Community-Based Programs**

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### **Youth Vary in Terms of How Long They Are Out-of-School**

Youth surveyed vary widely in terms of how long they were out of school before re-connecting with a program. Some young people are out only a few months, others are out for an entire year or more; other youth are still trying to get connected.

### **Some Don't Readily Re-connect**

Some youth spend time trying to re-connect or they bounce from program to program. One young woman says she enrolled in three different GED programs and then went to Youth Opportunity. She says that she thought YO was supportive, but that she left because of transportation difficulties. One young man enrolled in Job Corps, but left because he felt it was "too strict."

Other youth were incarcerated during the time they were out of school. Others were nearly idle; most were getting into trouble. Sample comments from these groups are: "I was out for 10 months and I wasn't doing nothing. I was doing bad." "I was in custody or on the run." "I was making kids." "I was hanging out with my friends and partying."

### **Many Are Referred to Programs by Friends**

There was a range of responses to this question of how youth re-connect with programs. Though some youth had been told about the program by a teacher, principal or guidance counselor, many young people were told by friends, or had friends or siblings that had attended the program. Some youth saw advertisements for the program. Youth who were pregnant sometimes heard about the program from a doctor; youth in DYS custody or youth who were pre-adjudicated found out about programs through parole officers or case managers. One youth found out about his program through a DYS worker.

## **Experiences in and Perceptions of Community-Based Programs**

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### **Smaller, more personalized programs differ from former school experiences**

Teens have rich responses to this question and responses are overwhelmingly positive. Most focus on smaller, more personalized classes and the opportunity to have one-on-one relationships with teachers. One youth says “the teachers really care and know about my situation.” Another adds, “teachers are very supportive and make you feel like someone.” A youth in a program put it this way: “There were other programs where teachers were just doing it for the paycheck. They didn’t really love the kids.” A second explains that “. . .one teacher spends time with me and cares that I understand the material. He motivates me.”

### **Relationships Make a Big Difference**

Over and over, youth talk about the importance of their relationship with teachers and how they feel personally regarded and respected. A student describes his experience of first walking into a class at a program:

*“When I walked in, he shook my hand, introduced himself and said his goal was to get everyone to love math. Then he looked at my score sheet and immediately said he noticed the areas I had trouble with. I felt like he knew what he was doing. All I had to do with work on the things I didn’t understand, not do things I already knew like in school.”*

### **Flexibility and Personal Responsibility Matter**

In a program for pregnant teens, youth say they like the case management, transportation, teachers and a flexible schedule. In one community-based program students report that they like a shorter day, being treated like a “young adult,” and small classes.

## **Relationships and Trust Foster Academic Growth**

This positive relationship and trust in teachers apparently helps students to take academic risks. Participants in one group say they take more chances as a result of the supportive atmosphere the teacher creates. One young man feels he is more comfortable asking a question if he is not sure of the answer. Another comments that he feels the teachers look at each student “as a person.” In yet another program, students say they feel cared for and “less judged.” They say if they skip school, the teacher will call the house.

Some students describe the atmosphere of their program as motivational. They like the personal attention, smaller groups and class sizes, as well as a more flexible schedule. Some mention that the pace of instruction is right in their program (neither too fast, nor too slow).

## **Youth in Programs Value Education**

Finally, many youth stress that they understand the value of a high school education and that they are appreciative to be given a second chance to “succeed” in the educational arena. One youth articulates this very clearly: “This program is a lifeline to me. It’s so hard to get a job without a diploma.”

## **Youth Have Career Interests But Lack Career Planning Know-how**

Many youth have specific ideas about what they’d like to do for work as adults. Youth in programs vary in terms of whether they have career goals or directions, as well as in how specific these career goals actually are. Youth cite a number of career areas they are interested in. These include “plumbing, engineering, teaching, nursing and computers.” Several times the facilitators reported that youth seemed to struggle with the question of career direction. In one program, responses varied, e.g. “becoming an actor,” “selling real estate,” “becoming a doctor,” “being a night club owner.” Only one of the participants in this particular group had a specific path for the future, noting: “I have already been accepted to X college.”

The adjudicated youth did not articulate entirely realistic career directions. Many out-of-school youth do not have clear ideas about how to translate

career interests into specific career plans. Some youth spoke about various people in their lives that have been positive and motivational influences. These people include parents, siblings and in one case, a neighbor.

*I want to be an accountant, but I'm not good in math. I'm in this program to get tutored in math."*

**"My cousin's uncle is a mechanic. I'm trying to chase the money and not chase the streets."**

*"I like carpentry because I like working with my hands."*

**"Finishing school and going to college and being in music. I want to go to Berklee."**

*"Right now I'm trying to get my GED. I want to be an electrician. That's where the money is."*

### **Career Goals Vary from General to Specific**

A number of youth in the focus groups mention "going to college," as a goal for the future, but do not necessarily have career directions in mind. Others talk about general goals like "providing for my children," "becoming wealthy," or "being self-sufficient."

In two in-school focus groups, nearly everyone had specific career goals and all had specific post-secondary plans for after high school. By contrast, many out-of-school youth do not have specific career plans and seem uncertain about how to proceed in order to prepare for careers that they are interested in.

## **Youth Struggle to Articulate What Help They Need to Meet Goals**

Youth struggled to respond to the question of what would help them achieve their goals. Many responded with general comments such as “family support,” “staying motivated,” “getting my GED,” or getting help with current issues. One alternative education focus group was noteworthy in terms of youth knowing specifically what they needed for support. This group says that secure housing, mentors and job fairs are important. One young person stresses job training and placement. His comment is “job availability and placement must be a commitment of the program—not just lip service.”

## **Stability Comes First in Planning for the Future**

Youth in the YO are all still working on stabilizing their lives. Most are dealing with homelessness, teen parenting and a general lack of support from family and friends. Many youth say they need assistance with finding housing. One participant reported traveling from one friend’s couch to another, while at the same time trying to secure permanent housing. Another youth says he is very concerned about becoming a father in October and not having permanent housing for himself or his girlfriend.

## **Youth Want to Work**

Youth in the YO also talk about working hard to get job ready but “then there are no jobs available.” If jobs are found, they are entry level without chance for advancement, rather than articulated career pathways. When YO youth (who are older than the general focus group population) have jobs, all state that they want positive feedback and encouragement in all aspects of their lives, particularly from employers. They say “just to have your boss say ‘nice job’ feels really good, but it never happens.”

## **Personal Motivation is Key**

Young people both in and out-of-school talked about persistence and personal motivation as important ways of achieving their goals. “Self esteem,” “a positive attitude,” “studying,” and “getting into the right environment where there are people who can motivate you.” are examples of responses that emphasized the link between personal responsibility and achieving future goals.

## Advice from Youth for Schools, Advocates and Providers

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Students were asked to provide advice in a couple of areas. The first is what would help more students stay in school and succeed. Young people provided these suggestions:

- Offer more engaging and interesting classes
- Have more teachers that don't give up on students
- Give more help with deciding which colleges to apply to and more help getting into college
- Hire teachers who can control their classes
- Provide opportunities for internships and job placements
- Need information provided in time to access opportunities
- Need overall support and better curriculum
- Need choice and help in selecting classes
- Want access to financial aid programs

Students were also asked about what could be done to get more out-of-school youth to connect with education or employment programs. Key among the suggestions is better advertising and outreach. Most participants think that there should be more information about the programs—advertising, special interest features on the news and the paper (the Herald or the Metro). Several youth talk about commercials where former students talk about the program to those who might be interested. Some talk about youth better spreading the word amongst their peers. Some say staff should be aware of these programs; for example, probation officers need to know about and support community-based education and career programs.

A key theme that youth come back to while answering this question is that these programs exist and everyone who needs them should have knowledge and access. One young person explains it this way: “People judge people by their looks and what they wear and (this) gets in the way of really knowing who you are and what you can do. So these programs don't get offered to everyone.”

Finally, youth say that it is important to show kids that they can succeed regardless of their backgrounds. These youth are keenly aware of the impact of racism, neighborhood violence, poverty and the absence of positive

role models in many low-income communities. One young woman says “parents are supposed to help you figure out your direction and there aren’t a lot of those parents out there. A lot of parents just give up.” Another young person says “I refuse to be in this cycle. I don’t think people at the top understand what’s going on. They need to walk down Broadway Street to see what my life is like. A lot of my friends are just trying to feed their families. There just need to be more programs like this to show people that there’s a way out.”

## Notes

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- 1 Data studies have been conducted by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University.
- 2 This report is entitled *The Boston Parent Focus Group Results: Identifying Issues Impacting Out-of-School Youth and Struggling Boston Public School Students*.
- 3 Many of these findings are consistent with a 2004 Boston Plan for Excellence study of youths' perception of school climate in Boston's high schools. For a more in-depth study of what in-school youth think about their high schools contact Boston Plan for Excellence or the BPS High School Renewal Office.