

CASE STUDY:

Youth Transitions Task Force: *A Ten-Year Retrospective*

About Our Case Studies

With each Case Study, we conduct an in-depth examination of a single initiative to extract lessons learned and promising practices. The Case Study series is another way in which the Rennie Center focuses attention on key issues, provides insight and perspective, and helps shape an effective public agenda in Massachusetts.

Introduction

In 2004, Boston Public Schools reported that more than 8% of its students dropped out of school.¹ The city faced a crisis. Thousands of students were failing to earn a high school diploma, a necessary credential for entrance into postsecondary education and/or the twenty-first century workforce. Graduation rates remained stagnant. Factors driving students' decisions to leave school were closely intertwined with the more pervasive problems of poverty in urban neighborhoods.² The challenge seemed overwhelming.

Yet, it was at this moment that the work of the Youth Transitions Task Force (YTTF) was beginning to coalesce, emerging as a source of advocacy and action throughout the district. Founded in 2004, YTTF is a cross-sector coalition composed of community-based organizations, Boston Public Schools, and city and state agencies. It has served as a powerful voice for addressing dropout issues in Boston and across Massachusetts. From its outset, YTTF worked with local leaders, state legislators, and other policymakers to advance innovations in education policy and practice and to support greater numbers of Boston youth in completing a high school diploma. YTTF members conducted, published, and disseminated key research to spark public conversations. They also mobilized constituents on issues affecting disconnected and at-risk youth and influenced decision-making at the state and local level, including important state legislation like *An Act to Improve Dropout Prevention and Reporting of Graduation Rates*.³ Looking back over a decade of work, one data point stands out: in 2014, Boston's dropout rate was 3.8%.⁴

In the following case study, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy documents the work of the YTTF in building a citywide, cross-sector coalition to support Boston youth in completing a high school diploma. Using a collective impact framework to examine how shared ownership of complex social issues can lead to large-scale change, the Rennie Center conducted interviews with more than a dozen YTTF participants and stakeholders representing community-based organizations, public high schools, local foundations, education institutions, city government, and national policy organizations. (See Appendix A for a complete list of interview respondents.) Research findings present an opportunity to reflect on YTTF's accomplishments and frame next steps in the work to ensure all students graduate from high school.

A case study of collective impact

Social change rarely results from individual action. Constituent groups must often find ways to work together, learn from each other, and coordinate their activities to achieve common goals. Further, working with diverse partners, including government agencies, community-based organizations, and businesses, introduces new ideas and areas of expertise and increases the capacity of all organizations to move an agenda forward.⁵ Initiatives characterized by this level of collaboration often have a greater impact than more isolated or diffuse efforts.⁶ In the most successful cases, ownership of results is shared, signifying a widespread commitment to large-scale improvements in the lives of community members. This notion of shared ownership, commonly referred to as collective impact, is based on the idea that social issues are often too complex to be

solved by a single organization.⁷ Change is linked to a set of particular pre-conditions, such as an influential champion, adequate financial resources to launch planning and sustain work, and a sense of urgency to act.⁸

The launch of the YTTF in Boston benefited from all of these pre-conditions. In 2004, the Youth Transitions Funders Group, a coalition of major national foundations, made available funding to convene cross-sector initiatives to address the “invisible” dropout crisis in America. The Boston Private Industry Council (PIC)—the city’s workforce board—organized a cross-sector coalition, and Mayor Thomas Menino pledged his full support for dropout reduction. Boston was selected for a grant and mobilization of the coalition began. A year later, the Boston Globe headlined Boston’s dropout crisis, noting that the district’s projected four-year dropout rate for the class of 2006 was 27%,⁹ which solidified the sense of urgency needed to tackle the dropout issue.

The ability to achieve collective impact does not begin or end with the existence of pre-conditions, of course. FSG, a leading think tank in the field of community impact, identifies five key strategies that help drive change:¹⁰

- **A common agenda.** All participants have a shared vision for change, including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed-upon actions.
- **Shared measurement.** Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and encourages participants to hold each other accountable.
- **Mutually reinforcing activities.** Participant activities must be differentiated, bringing a clear purpose and specific expertise, while remaining coordinated.
- **Continuous communication.** Consistent and open communication is needed across the many partners to build trust and create and maintain motivation.
- **Backbone support.** Creating and managing collective impact requires separate staff capacity to facilitate the entire initiative; the necessary skills are most often found in an intermediary organization.

Successful partnerships organize around these key strategies and depend on periodic moments of reflection, reassessment, and course correction to ensure that social changes are lasting. Similarly, this case study provides a unique opportunity to reflect on important accomplishments made by the YTTF and the challenges that lie ahead.

A decade of progress for Boston’s at-risk youth

The Youth Transitions Task Force began its work by raising public awareness on the dropout issue. With the award of funding from the national Youth Transitions Funders Group in 2004, the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) and founding YTTF members began the hard work of bringing together stakeholders from across different sectors to engage in conversations about the need for dropout reduction strategies. Founding members, which were characterized by their deep knowledge and diverse approaches to serving youth, included public agencies like the Boston Public Schools (BPS) and the Mayor’s Office of Jobs and Community Service; community-based networks like the Boston Parent Organizing Network and the Boston Youth Service Network; and research centers such as Northeastern University’s Center for Labor Market Studies. All of these organizations quickly agreed that the first step was to raise public awareness on the issue of dropouts. The YTTF began to meet monthly; these early conversations featured discussions of the challenges ahead. A culture of “amnesty for all” emerged, in which members and partners participated on equal footing regardless of past work or experience with youth and blame was not considered an appropriate strategy. As the first year of YTTF drew to a close, coalition-building reached an important milestone: A mobilized, diverse team of leaders representing different sectors were committed to working on a plan of action for improving dropout reduction.¹¹

Research and data give the whole thing fuel. Working with partners like BPS, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Center for Labor Market Studies, YTTF brought forth new data on the number of Boston students who start 9th grade and do not complete high school, drop out in a given year, or were currently out of school. As part of *Too Big to Be Seen: The Invisible Dropout Crisis in Boston and America*, YTTF published a first-ever quantitative and qualitative analysis of the local dropout crisis; this report revealed that between 1,400 and 1,600 students dropped out

“Rarely can you make demonstrable progress without the coalition. You need external and internal partners, commitment to do it, infrastructure coordinated, and external partners who are committed for a long-term vision. That is the remarkable part of what’s been sustained.”

Carol Johnson, former superintendent,
Boston Public Schools

of school each year, and only two out of every three who started in the ninth grade graduated in four years. In 2007, in partnership with BPS and Jobs for the Future, the Parthenon Group released a groundbreaking analysis segmenting Boston's dropout population based on student age and credits needed to reach graduation. This report coined terminology like “young and close” and “old and far,” referring to students who are high-school age and need only a few more academic credits to graduate, and students who are over-age for their grade and need many credits to graduate.

Locally, this was the first time that such in-depth knowledge of the dropout population was available. In the current era of data-driven decision-making in schools, publication of these statistics seems commonplace. But in the years it was conducted, this deep data work was groundbreaking. Andrew Moore, Senior Fellow at the National League of Cities, explains, “*Too Big to Be Seen* put Boston on the national map.” Taken together, *Too Big to Be Seen* and the Parthenon report provided a common definition of the problem—and a common language—for BPS and other YTTF members to describe the different challenges in getting students to a high school diploma. In addition, the Parthenon report repositioned the seemingly overwhelming task of decreasing the dropout rate into more purposeful conversations about specific strategies for helping students, so much so that Superintendent Carol Johnson adopted the report as a blueprint for accelerating progress against the dropout rate.

A common agenda is generated by citywide engagement on the dropout issue.

Too Big to Be Seen stretched beyond quantitative data to document the experience of youth, parents, educators, and providers. Few other cities had taken a close look at the reasons why students were leaving public schools or had considered the capacity of existing alternative programs to serve the various populations of students who would benefit. YTTF members and stakeholders citywide heard about students' need to connect with an adult and how schools could feel unsafe and might not always offer an academic “fit” to students' interests and needs. YTTF members developed practice and policy recommendations that quickly became a shared agenda for the coalition:

- Refine dropout data collection and deepen the analysis;
- Develop early intervention strategies and outreach and referral systems;
- Increase alternative education and training opportunities;
- Create school climates that are welcoming and respectful;
- Increase coordination among schools, alternative programs, and city agencies; and
- Develop revenue strategies.

Members and allies took recommendations back to their own organizations, adopting new practices and policies to better serve young people. As such, these recommendations became the foundation for many of the dropout prevention and recovery initiatives that have been launched in schools and community organizations in Boston.

Partnerships with community-based organizations advanced innovations in practice. Bringing community-based partners into conversations about serving at-risk youth was an important part of the YTTF's early coalition-building activities. These organizations—characterized by their focus on youth development and high degree of cultural competence—were able to spark innovation by sharing knowledge about successful practices for meeting student needs. For example, the Boston Youth Service Network (BYSN) introduced new practices for working with students, worked to strengthen professional development for educators and youth workers, and increased cross-agency referrals. BYSN also influenced district-level policy on developing alternative education options, resulting in two community partners operating schools in the 2015-16 year. BYSN and BPS are now piloting credit-bearing out-of-school time programs with the goal of providing youth additional pathways to earn an academic credential. Additionally, City Year was one of the first agencies to drive

How has YTTF built collective impact?

YTTF stakeholders shared perspectives on coalition-building strategies to achieve collective impact.

▪ **Common agenda.** YTTF participants invested time in developing a common understanding of the dropout problem and potential strategies for addressing it. As Emmanuel Allen of the Re-Engagement Center explains, “Everyone knew it was a problem, but no one had a possible solution.”

▪ **Continuous communication.** Consistent and open conversation characterized YTTF meetings as they steadily became more solutions-oriented and important forums for sharing information.

▪ **Backbone support.** The Boston PIC, a non-profit intermediary organization, has served as the coordinator of the YTTF since its initial convening and has provided the dedicated staff necessary to ensure regular communication on relevant information when the coalition came together.

▪ **Shared measurement.** YTTF meetings routinely focus on two big indicators that govern the dropout reduction issue: the annual dropout rate and the 4- and 5-year cohort graduation rate.

▪ **Mutually reinforcing activities.** YTTF members have been purposeful and effective in building cross-sector relationships defined by differentiated and customized supports for at-risk youth.

the actual use of the BPS early indicator system in identifying at-risk students for services designed to have students on-track and college-ready by 10th grade. With more new ideas generated and shared at YTTF meetings, both community-based and institutional members became empowered to start experimenting with new practices focused on out-of-school youth and struggling students.

National influence strengthened local practice. As noted above, the publication of *Too Big to Be Seen* and the Parthenon report brought Boston into a select cohort of large municipalities across the country that were pursuing data-driven, citywide solutions to the dropout crisis. In turn, this translated into opportunities for YTTF leadership—who were at the forefront of outreach—to participate in national convenings. Forums, which were focused on issues like engaging stakeholders across sectors, bringing students successfully back to school, and supporting at-risk students still in school, enhanced learning among YTTF members and began to influence practice in member organizations. Over time, YTTF and PIC leaders were positioned to anticipate policy innovations and the availability of potential funding. YTTF stakeholders discussed the importance of leadership “being ahead of the curve” in learning about and planning a local vision for dropout recovery that aligned with national trends.

The interplay between national research and local feedback led YTTF to begin an accelerated citywide effort to address the needs of out-of-school youth. As part of Project Reconnect, funded by the Boston PIC, two former dropouts canvassed Boston neighborhoods, finding students who left school before graduating and informing them of their options to pursue a high school diploma. Results were immediate and astounding, as hundreds of youth returned to school. This led to the September 2009 launch of the Re-Engagement Center (REC), a partnership between BPS and the Boston PIC. As one of the first municipalities nationally to open a citywide re-engagement center designed to provide youth coming back to school with referrals for education options, Boston solidified its national standing as a leader in the dropout reduction field. Establishing a re-engagement center was important to network-building as well: the work relied heavily on canvassing and recruiting youth, skills in which community-based partners hold deep expertise. It also depended on knowledge sharing across sectors to explore new learning options for youth choosing to return to pursue a diploma.

With differentiated dropout strategies defined, citywide and statewide policy influence grew. Since its convening, YTTF has utilized public awareness about dropout reduction issues as a strategic approach to improve opportunities for the city’s at-risk youth. YTTF stakeholders described the relative strengths of the Boston PIC’s role in organizing the coalition. First, the PIC has had the capacity to do so, maintaining regular contact with members to bolster consistent engagement and ensuring that routine information-sharing is a key priority. Next, the PIC has been viewed as a knowledgeable and influential resource on policy issues related to the city’s youth, one that continues to demonstrate expertise on how to move a policy agenda forward. Finally, the combination of this capacity and know-how has translated into an ability for YTTF membership to build public will on the issue of dropout reduction.

After a few years of attention focused on local dropout reduction issues, a state policy agenda around high school graduation was activated. The Massachusetts Legislature passed *An Act to Improve Dropout Prevention and Reporting Graduation Rates*, instituting a Dropout Commission that examined the issue statewide. The resulting commission report became a state-level primer on the dropout issue, echoing many of the same recommendations initially cast in *Too Big To Be Seen*. Where policy progress has been made, the PIC and YTTF depended on strong allied networks in the community, like the Multicultural Dropout Outreach Collaborative and the Mass Alliance on Teen Pregnancy, to move state and local policy.

The way forward

A decade ago, Boston faced annual dropout rates that primed the city to take up the goal of dropout reduction. In the ensuing years, substantial progress has been made in reducing the dropout rate. Challenges remain, however, as each year hundreds of Boston students continue to leave school without a diploma or skills sufficient to participate fully in the local economy. Revisiting strategic questions that define dropout reduction is critical to sustaining progress.

The challenge of capacity and resources. *Too Big to Be Seen* described the pervasive nature of the dropout problem in Boston and the limited options available to students interested in an alternative route to a diploma. YTTF has helped build public awareness of the need

“The levels of understanding of the issue have become more sophisticated. Without YTTF, and info sharing, we would not have gotten to this level.”

Jenny Curtin, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

for greater investments in alternative education, and BPS has acted to increase infrastructure and educational options. However, nearly a decade after the publication of *Too Big to be Seen*, capacity for alternative education within BPS remains a challenge. At issue is more than simply quantity. Additional variety is also needed in the educational options offered to 16- to 19-year olds desiring to return to school for a high school diploma. Students who have already dropped out may not succeed if they return to a traditional classroom. Around the country, new approaches are emerging and showing promise; given the established partnership between YTTF and BPS, Boston may consider implementing some of these innovative alternative education models.

The challenge of intersecting goals. Even as high school completion has emerged as a national priority, the need for postsecondary credentials in the labor market has been given equal urgency. National funders have acted on these parallel imperatives by seeding the work of opportunity youth collaboratives (OYCs)—groups focused on the needs of all 16-24 year-olds who are out of school and out of work. Boston’s OYC, organized by the PIC and the Boston Opportunity Agenda, has chosen to focus on postsecondary pathways by applying some of the same approaches used in the early work of the YTTF: convening community-based partners and documenting strengths and gaps in the system. Now that PIC leadership is organizing two local coalitions whose goals are intertwined, how do they purposefully operate these so they inform each other, while maintaining progress toward separate and distinct goals?

The challenge of positioning. Over the last decade, YTTF leadership and membership have influenced a number of important accomplishments that have had local impact on the lives of students—perhaps most notably the opening of the Re-Engagement Center. The YTTF has supported the re-engagement of more students by creating a space to align resources, resulting in strengthened partnerships among community-based organizations and the district that enhance service provision and expand options for students. Yet YTTF stakeholders continue to consider: what are the desired goals, and how can they best be achieved? Given the PIC’s investment in the success of both the REC and YTTF, how is the YTTF best positioned to coordinate and centralize partnerships with community-based organizations who are providing alternative options other than the REC?

“[There is a] cliff of support at age 18. Policy is lagging in what good practice has told us about transition—we need to rethink the assumptions about what is supposed to happen as youth transition from school to adulthood.”

Andrew Moore, National League of Cities

“YTTF—through the REC—has built an ‘inside’ relationship with the district. It’s the PIC’s program but it’s also the district’s. And can they do more with it? How do you balance this critical friend role while maintaining shared ownership?”

Nahir Torres, Hyams Foundation

How does YTTF sustain collective impact?

YTTF stakeholders shared perspectives on continuing challenges to coalition-building.

- **Shared measurement.** YTTF members from BPS can access data and indicators concerning dropouts, including early warning data identifying students at risk for dropping out. However, community-based members spoke about the need for more data that aligns directly to their work and how this “rolls up” in terms of impact on the dropout rate. Updated data, such as a new analysis similar to the Parthenon report, would further enhance the coalition’s understanding of the current dropout population.
- **Mutually reinforcing activities.** With a strong existing partnership between the Boston PIC and the BPS supporting the REC, more options for re-engagement exist than ever before. Yet continuing capacity challenges in BPS have meant that more students are doing coursework for credit at the REC than had been envisioned. YTTF members are trying to both advocate for more alternative education options in BPS and coordinate services so that more referrals translate into seats in community-based programs once students register at the REC.
- **Common agenda.** YTTF partners have discussed the “new milestone” of college- and career-readiness that should define the work with Boston’s at-risk youth. The PIC is also convening the Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC) with the Boston Opportunity Agenda, and the OYC has taken this goal as a primary mission. While the YTTF is focused on a younger population (16- to 19-year-old dropouts) than the 20- to 24-year-olds that the OYC is targeting, YTTF members would like to see a greater level of coordination and information-sharing between the two groups.

The challenge of momentum. Keeping YTTF members actively engaged is a perennial concern that the Boston PIC has taken up in organizing the YTTF. There are practical concerns like keeping convenings relevant to support change in practice over time; there are strategic issues related to how to “recharge” stakeholders so that a sense of urgency around dropout reduction issues is sustained. YTTF members hold interesting perspectives on this issue; almost all stakeholders spoke to the progress on dropout reduction that has been made in a relatively short period of time, and several spoke to the need for a “refresh” of YTTF goals moving forward. For example, would it be appropriate to update *Too Big to Be Seen* to include more recent data on Boston students who have left school, and is it an opportunity to build consensus among YTTF members on a next decade of goals? These stakeholder suggestions speak to the continuing importance of the YTTF and the need to balance innovative thinking with consistency of purpose.

“YTTF has definitely grown in size over the past few years, and when growth happens, you need to be attentive to keep the core pieces of who you are, why you were founded, and investing in buy-in.”

Charmaine Arthur, Multicultural Dropout Outreach Collaborative

Looking back to look forward

In the past decade, school- and community-based partners working through the Youth Transitions Task Force have influenced policy change on dropout prevention and recovery in Boston and Massachusetts. A number of changes have been made that benefit young people: the passing of a dropout bill in 2008, the opening of the REC, and improved BPS infrastructure for at-risk students. The work of many actors is reflected in the steadily decreasing dropout rates of the last decade. Moving forward, the Youth Transitions Task Force faces challenges in promoting both dropout prevention and alternative education programs to close the remaining graduation gap. Nevertheless, Boston’s progress on the dropout issue over the last ten years can give partners confidence that impact at scale is possible if the disciplines of collective impact are observed.

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12. Roger Oser, case study interview, February 25, 2015.

Appendix A: Case Study Respondents

District and local leaders/policymakers

- Rahn Dorsey, Chief of Education, City of Boston
- Carol Johnson, Former Superintendent, Boston Public Schools
- Mary Skipper, Assistant Superintendent, Boston Public Schools
- Alejandra St. Guillen, Office for New Bostonians, City of Boston

National and state leaders/policymakers

- Lili Allen, Back on Track Designs, Jobs for the Future
- Jenny Curtin, Office of College and Career Readiness, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- Andrew Moore, Senior Fellow, National League of Cities
- Paul Reville, Former Massachusetts Secretary of Education/Harvard Education Redesign Lab/Rennie Center Founder

Philanthropic Leaders

- Nahir Torres, Program Officer, Hyams Foundation

Community leaders

- Emmanuel Allen, Re-Engagement Center, Boston PIC
- Charmaine Arthur, Freedom House/Multicultural Dropout Outreach Collaborative
- Kathy Hamilton, Boston PIC
- Bette Bohlke O’Gara, Executive Director, KeySteps
- Neil Sullivan, Boston PIC

School leaders

- Roger Oser, William J. Ostiguy High
- Sung-Joon Pai, Diploma Plus, Charlestown High School



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The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy's 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 about this report, please contact Jennifer Poulos, Research Director, at jpoulos@renniecenter.org.

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