



PARTHENON

Untapped potential

Engaging all Connecticut youth



September 2016

By Parthenon-EY Education practice
Ernst & Young LLP

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Table of contents

Acknowledgements	2
Foreword: An invitation to action.....	3
Introduction: Connecticut's untapped potential.....	4
Methodology: Defining disengaged and disconnected youth.....	8
Section 1: An urgent need	10
Section 2: The path from disengagement to disconnection	16
Section 3: Promising points of intervention.....	22
Section 4: Changing the youth experience	32
Section 5: Conditions for success	42
Conclusion.....	51
Endnotes.....	52



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First and foremost, we are grateful to the Connecticut State Department of Education, whose openness to sharing data and their time enabled the statewide scope of this report. The commissioner and members of her team demonstrated both a commitment to serving disengaged and disconnected youth, and a clear desire to learn from the findings of our research.

Over the past 10 months, we’ve had the chance to visit with more than 150 individuals from across Connecticut whose work focuses on disengaged and disconnected youth in some capacity, and to hear from some young people themselves. We particularly appreciate the time spent with superintendents, principals, educators and students in East Hartford, Hartford, Meriden, New Haven, New London, Norwalk, Stamford and Windham, where we visited public schools and saw firsthand the opportunities and challenges facing disengaged and disconnected youth today. In addition, we were fortunate to meet with leaders from more than 50 Connecticut-based community organizations and foundations. Hearing the range of perspectives that were shared and learning about the significant work that is already underway across the state enriched our understanding of the need and potential in Connecticut, and also highlighted promising practices, many of which we cite in this report.

Of the many individuals whose thoughts have helped us along the way, we particularly thank Michele Cahill, Bob Hughes and Chad Ferguson, all of whose expertise was instrumental in shaping the approach and conclusions in this report.

Finally, we thank Barbara Dalio and the Dalio Foundation both for their financial support of this research, and more importantly, their leadership, collaboration and unyielding desire to help meet the needs of Connecticut’s disengaged and disconnected youth.

Parthenon-EY Education practice
Ernst & Young LLP

Foreword: An invitation to action

Connecticut's youth have tremendous potential, and teachers and principals work tirelessly every day to support them in realizing their goals. Yet the urgent need to engage all young people requires more support for teachers and schools. Helping every young person in our state to achieve his or her dreams is everyone's responsibility.

As the leader of my family foundation's work in public education, I am deeply committed to improving the well-being of students in Connecticut through collaboration and shared learning. I first began working with teachers, principals, union leaders, students and community leaders more than five years ago, starting at an alternative high school in Norwalk. I perceived the students had the highest need, and I wanted to find a way to work together to support them. The experience resulted in many meaningful relationships and grew into an even stronger commitment to support students across Connecticut.

We cannot succeed in engaging our youth if we lack an understanding of their needs and experiences. I commissioned the Parthenon-EY team to study the needs of youth who are disengaged or disconnected from school because they have done similar work with public school systems across the nation. What would it take to help disengaged and disconnected youth graduate from high school ready for the future? I asked them to author and prepare a report for the benefit of the state and general public in hopes that sharing the research openly would help us all forge new partnerships committed to improving outcomes for Connecticut's youth.

This report sheds new light on critical questions: who are the disengaged and disconnected youth in Connecticut? Where and when are these students falling off track? How well are they performing today? What can we do to better meet their needs? What are the opportunities and potential benefits for the state? While the report finds that tens of thousands of youth are disengaged or disconnected in our state, it does not prescribe how we should address the problem. We are all empowered to define the path forward.

I sincerely hope this report leads to a more informed statewide conversation around what we all can do to support our students, teachers, principals, public schools and communities. I look forward to your ideas, solutions and partnership.

Barbara Dalio
Dalio Foundation

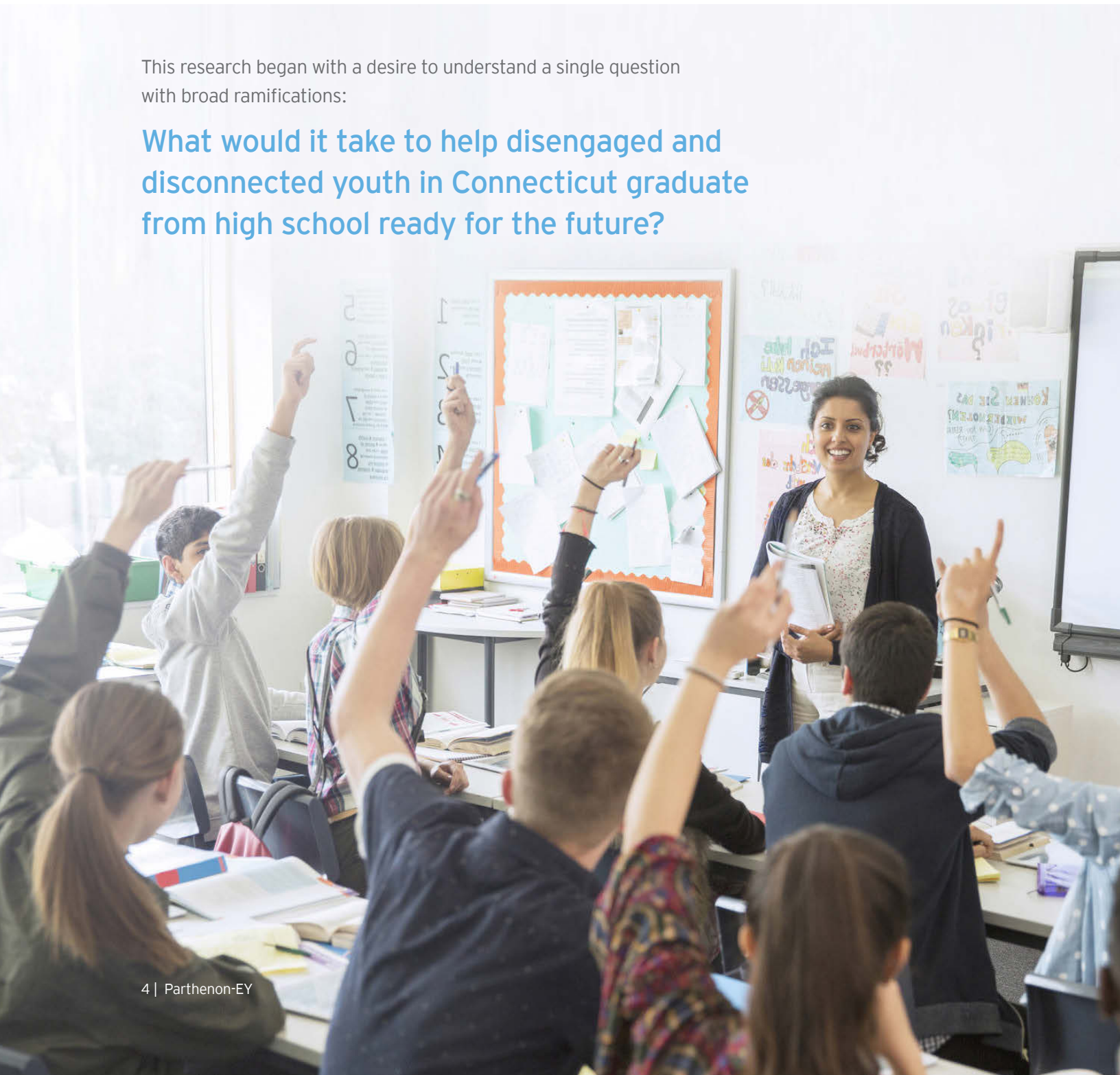


Introduction:

Connecticut's untapped potential

This research began with a desire to understand a single question with broad ramifications:

What would it take to help disengaged and disconnected youth in Connecticut graduate from high school ready for the future?



Though the nature of this question focuses on public education, the imperative to better meet the needs of disengaged and disconnected youth has relevance and impact far beyond the walls of a school. Across Connecticut and the country, educators, state and local leaders, policymakers, non-profit organizations, philanthropists and community members are increasingly focused on this population of young people – and its connection to issues of economic recovery, fiscal health, income inequality and criminal justice. Understanding the needs of disengaged and disconnected youth is central to a wide range of questions at the heart of our current civic discourse, and the coalition of stakeholders that can help to fuel the progress that is needed is just as broad.

This report argues that addressing the needs of disengaged and disconnected youth is more critical now than ever, considering the rising stakes for the youth themselves. For much of the 20th century, students disconnecting from high school could still expect to find a job and career that would support them and their families; today, the evolution of the modern economy has largely taken that option away. Across the nation, young adults without a high school diploma, and even those with a diploma who don't proceed to any post-secondary education, have a diminishing chance of finding stable employment, while those who do find work see their wages falling further behind those of their peers. Connecticut's once-thriving industrial cities – now among the state's most impoverished areas – stand as evidence of the same forces at work in the state.

The combined fiscal impact on the state, at a time of significant budgetary challenge for Connecticut, is substantial. Our analysis suggests that the annual fiscal impact of high school dropouts on the state budget – in terms of lost revenue and additional expenses – is more than \$900 million.¹ In other

words, in a state where some estimate a structural deficit of around \$1 billion per year, there is about that much lost from the budget each year due to the collective failure to meet the needs of disengaged and disconnected youth.²

By contrast, helping disengaged and disconnected youth connect to success would spark a virtuous cycle for both these young people and the state as a whole: stronger schools, higher employment, fewer individuals becoming involved with incarceration or addiction, healthier and more prosperous communities, and more rapid and sustainable economic growth. In a period when public and private sector leaders in Connecticut are considering the challenge of the state's lagging economic and fiscal performance, it is hard to ignore the potential represented by tens of thousands of disengaged young people in need of support and opportunity.

If the state could reduce the total number of disengaged and disconnected youth by half, our analysis estimates that Connecticut would benefit from:



2,000 more students graduating high school each year, raising Connecticut's graduation rate to the highest in the country at 94%



8,000 more jobs created for young people aged 18–35, reducing the rate of youth unemployment in the state by 16%



Over time, 4,000 fewer people incarcerated, which in and of itself – at an average cost per inmate of \$50,000 per year – equates to \$200 million in savings



And, as all these benefits accrue over the long term, economic value to the state of \$3 billion in additional gross state product

We believe this report offers two distinct contributions in building understanding of the needs in Connecticut and pointing toward potential solutions.

First, we provide a data-driven perspective on how to better serve disengaged and disconnected youth. Through our conversations and research, we found that the answers to basic questions were not well established: how many disengaged and disconnected youth are there in the state? Where do these students go to school? What communities do they live in? When are they falling off track? What key patterns in their pathways can help to inform potential solutions for this population? Understanding the scale and shape of the need in a specific, quantitative way is a prerequisite toward achieving real progress. We expect our analysis will reaffirm some basic facts, uncover other new insights and expose some aspects of conventional wisdom as myths – all to get us closer to finding the right path forward for engaging all of Connecticut's youth.

Second, this report is truly statewide in its scope. Through data provided by the Connecticut State

Department of Education (CSDE), our analysis covers all students enrolled in a Connecticut public high school at any point in the four-year period from 2011-12 through 2014-15, based on fully anonymized student-level information to protect student privacy. This means that we can understand in a detailed way how the level of need varies in each part of the state, and also depict how mobility within the state – and across the different segments of the state's educational landscape – exacerbates the challenge faced by Connecticut's disengaged and disconnected youth.

The nature of the data that we collected also defines certain limitations in the scope of our analysis. Our work focuses on the path of students through their high school years, and on identifying potential strategies to improve outcomes within that time period specifically. Where possible in this report, we do discuss implications for the middle school years and for connection to post-secondary education; however, both of these topics emerge from our work as clear areas for ongoing research.



Your invitation

Ultimately, we hope this report can jump-start a statewide conversation about how best to support disengaged and disconnected youth, and we offer it as *an invitation*:

- ▶ **An invitation for educators** to reimagine the experience of Connecticut's high school students and to envision what it would take to engage all students to succeed
 - ▶ **An invitation for civic leaders and the statewide community** to come forward with approaches and solutions to respond to the need this report documents
 - ▶ **An invitation for researchers and advocates** to explore the many important questions left unanswered, and to help build the state's collective knowledge of effective solutions
 - ▶ **An invitation for young people and their families** to inform the conversation by sharing their stories and experiences, and to contribute to the design of programs to more effectively meet their needs
 - ▶ **An invitation for citizens** – representing all communities in the state – to join together to engage all of Connecticut's young people in building a better, more inclusive future
-

Data and analysis, in and of themselves, will of course not change the outlook for any young person. But the stark and sobering nature of the findings in this report, along with the incredible untapped potential of Connecticut's youth, should galvanize leaders and citizens to support young people in graduating from high school ready for the future.



Our methodology

Defining disengaged and disconnected youth

Throughout this report, we refer to disengaged and disconnected youth and go into significant detail, exploring the profile and pathway of these young adults. Yet these terms today do not have a specific definition within Connecticut. Thus, the first step of our work was to assign quantifiable parameters for this population in a research-based way.

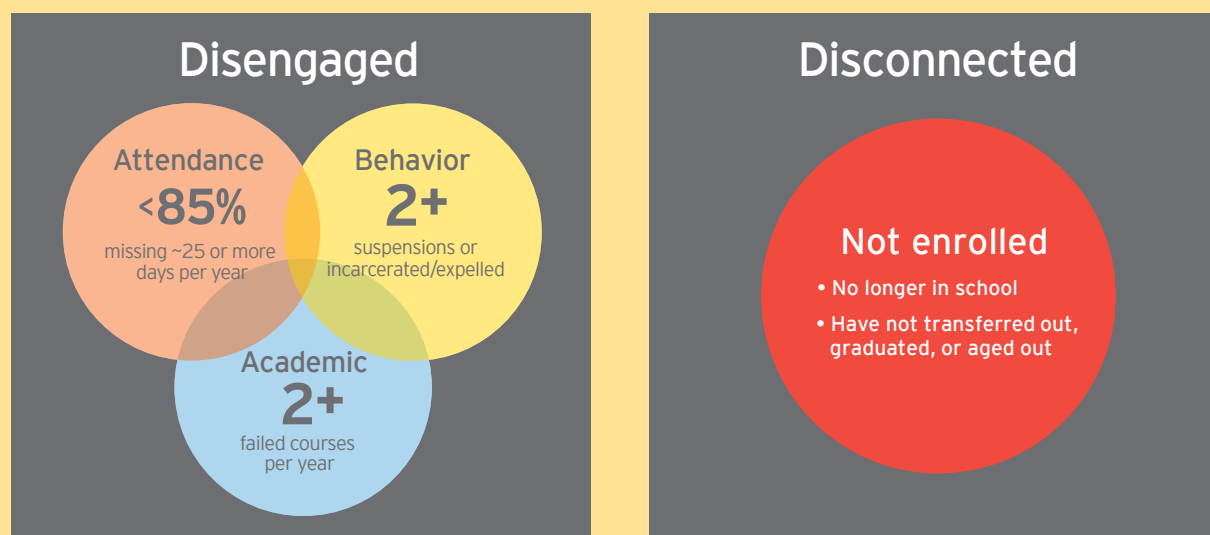
While a study of this nature is new for Connecticut, there is a substantial national body of literature on issues of adolescent engagement with school and early indicators of dropout. This literature consistently identifies three aspects of engagement as powerfully correlated with eventual student outcomes: attendance,

behavior and academics as measured by course performance and credit accumulation. These lessons, combined with our desire to understand the population of youth no longer enrolled in school, led to the framework represented in the diagram below.

When we faced choices about the specific thresholds within each variable that we would use to classify a student as disengaged, our approach was to use Connecticut data to identify key inflection points where specific levels of performance appear critical to student success.

For example, while both the U.S. Department of Education and the CSDE use a 90% attendance

Figure 1: Defining disengaged and disconnected youth



Disengaged youth are enrolled in school, but show at least one of three signs of not being effectively connected to their education.

Disconnected youth have not received a high school diploma or equivalent and are not enrolled in high school despite being 21 or younger.

threshold to define chronic absenteeism, we found that students in Connecticut who have exactly a 90% attendance rate also have an 85% chance of graduating in four years, a rate that approximates the state average. By comparison, students with an attendance rate of 85% or lower graduate at a rate of 50% (72% for those who have an attendance rate of exactly 85%). By defining our threshold of attendance disengagement at 85% rather than 90%, we reduced our estimate of the disengaged youth population by 9,000 students (i.e., there are 9,000 students in Connecticut with an attendance rate between 85% and 90%) – and focused our research on a set of youth with even greater need.

Our choice to use thresholds of multiple course failures and multiple suspensions within a single school year to define academic and behavioral disengagement, respectively, was informed by similar considerations. In general, our definition of the disengaged youth

population could be considered conservative in that many students are struggling with truancy, discipline and coursework but do not meet the specific criteria that we have used in our work.

Finally, we define disconnected youth as young adults who lack a high school diploma and are not enrolled in a Connecticut high school, but who were age 21 or younger on the first day of school in 2014 – such that they were legally entitled to a public education should they have chosen to re-enroll. This population does include some students who are currently enrolled in the adult education system, but does not include those who have already earned either a credit diploma or GED in an adult education program. Later in this report, we will discuss in greater detail the role of adult education as a contributor to the challenges and opportunities for young people.



Section 1: An urgent need



The headline statistics on public education in Connecticut often speak to the state's many strengths and its relative affluence. The statewide graduation rate is rising and was reported to be 87% for the class of 2015. Reading and math proficiency levels generally rank in the top five of all states.³ According to *US News & World Report*, Connecticut has the second highest percentage of nationally ranked public high schools of any state.⁴ And while it has long been clear that Connecticut continues to struggle with a persistent achievement gap that also ranks among the nation's largest, it is easy for many to imagine that the challenge of disengaged and disconnected youth in Connecticut is a niche issue, affecting a small number of communities or only certain types of students.

To the contrary, the data show that disengagement and disconnection present a large-scale issue in Connecticut, and that it is also a powerful economic and equity issue.

The reality is that there were 39,000 disengaged and disconnected high school youth in Connecticut in the 2014-15 school year, *a figure that is equivalent to 22% of high school enrollment in the state*. When

more than one out of every five students in the state are disengaged or disconnected, it is reflective of a structural challenge that goes to the core of what is happening in Connecticut high schools – not an issue that is limited to a particular student group, geographic region or handful of schools.

Indeed, the geographical distribution of these students speaks to the fact that the need is seen in every part of the state. Looking at the map on page 13 (see Figure 2), it is frustrating but perhaps not surprising to see that the cities in the state that have the highest rates of poverty are also those with the most severe concentration of disengaged and disconnected youth. Yet the overall picture shows high levels of challenge in many suburban communities and acute need in rural areas of the state that in several cases mirrors that of urban communities.

In sum, there were 33 school systems in Connecticut home to at least 250 disengaged and disconnected youth. There were 113 school systems with at least 50 disengaged and disconnected youth. And there were 151 – nearly all school systems in the state – with at least one such student.

“Disengaged and disconnected youth present an urgent and widespread need for Connecticut that touches every part of our state. Our graduation rates are rising because we have worked hard together to support our high school students and educators. But to achieve the nation's best graduation rate, everyone must commit to engaging all of Connecticut's youth, especially those most at-risk of becoming disconnected from school.”

– Dr. Dianna R. Wentzell, Connecticut Commissioner of Education

39,000 disengaged and disconnected youth

More than one out of five high school students in Connecticut

The number of disengaged versus disconnected youth

25,000 | are disengaged 14,000 | are disconnected

Attendance as the largest driver of disengagement

14,000 | have attendance below 85% **vs.** 11,000 | have been suspended multiple times or failed multiple courses

Multiple factors at play for many students

8,000 | have multiple factors of disengagement 2,000 | are exhibiting disengagement on all three dimensions of attendance, academics and behavior

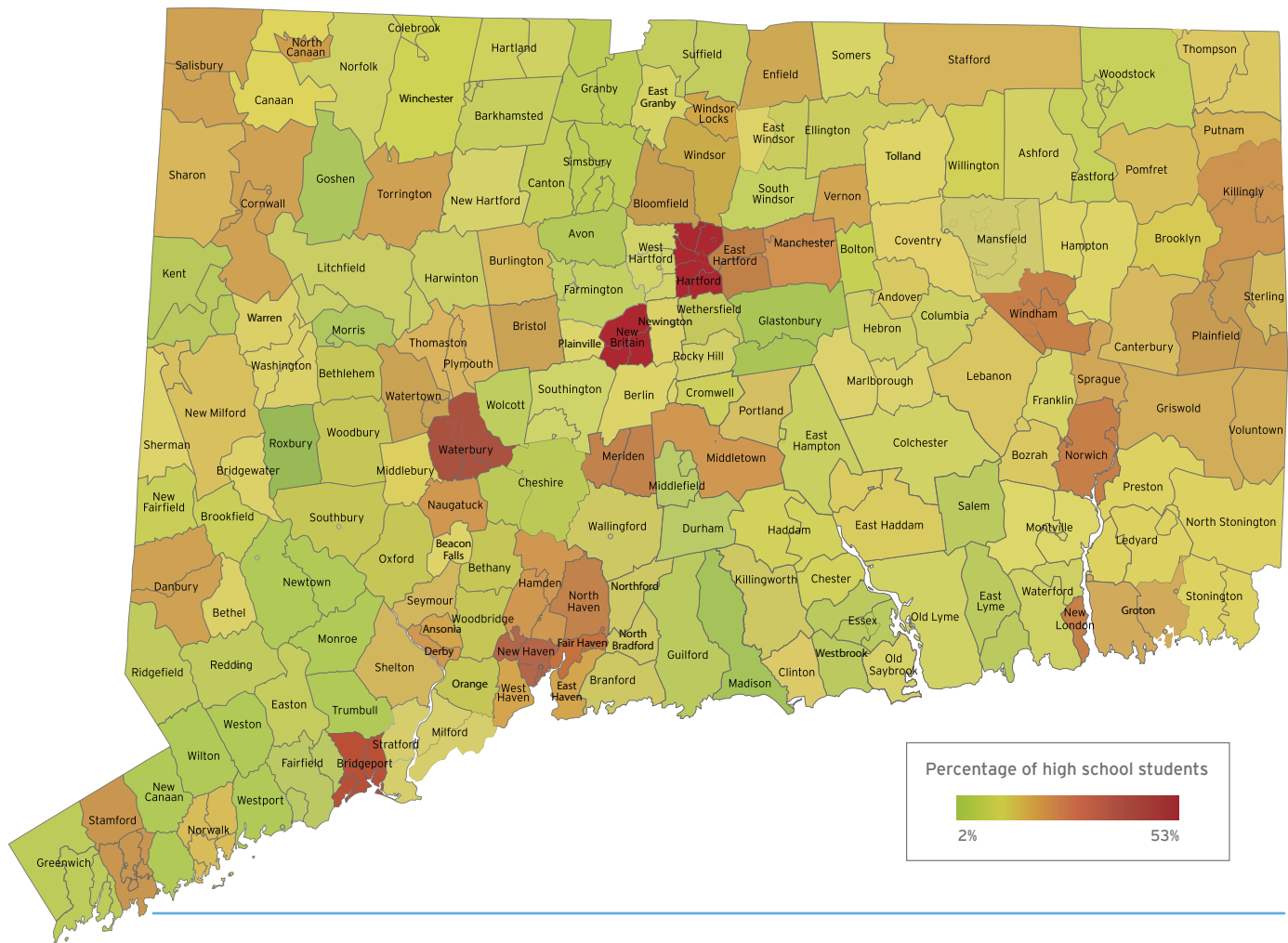
Multiple dimensions of demographic inequity

78% | are low-income or minority (vs. 38% of all other students) 36% | are boys of color (vs. 14% of all other students) 34% | students with disabilities or English language learners (vs. 15% of all other students)

At the same time, a very diverse population representing every community

Nearly 6,000 | disengaged youth are white or Asian from middle and high-income households About 9,000 | disengaged youth are from towns with above-average income levels

Figure 2: Percentage of disengaged and disconnected students by town of residence, 2014-15



Clearly, the need is significant. But so are many issues that the state community could confront, both within public education and across other areas. In an era of scarce public resources and substantial need on many fronts, some may question whether disengaged and disconnected youth should be a priority concern.

Yet the evolution of the modern economy lends a unique urgency to this issue: in economic terms, the stakes for disengaged and disconnected youth are higher than they have ever been. A generation or two ago, the labor market offered the potential for young people without a high school degree to nonetheless



“Most jobs won’t hire you without a high school diploma, and I really want to get a job that I care about.”

– Connecticut high school student

find stable employment and an adequate wage. Today, young people without a high school degree face drastically reduced prospects of productive futures. In 1980, a college graduate earned 70% more in annual income than a high school dropout – by 2015, this gap had doubled to 140% more in annual income, a premium to education that adds up to a difference in income over the course of a career of more than \$1 million.⁵

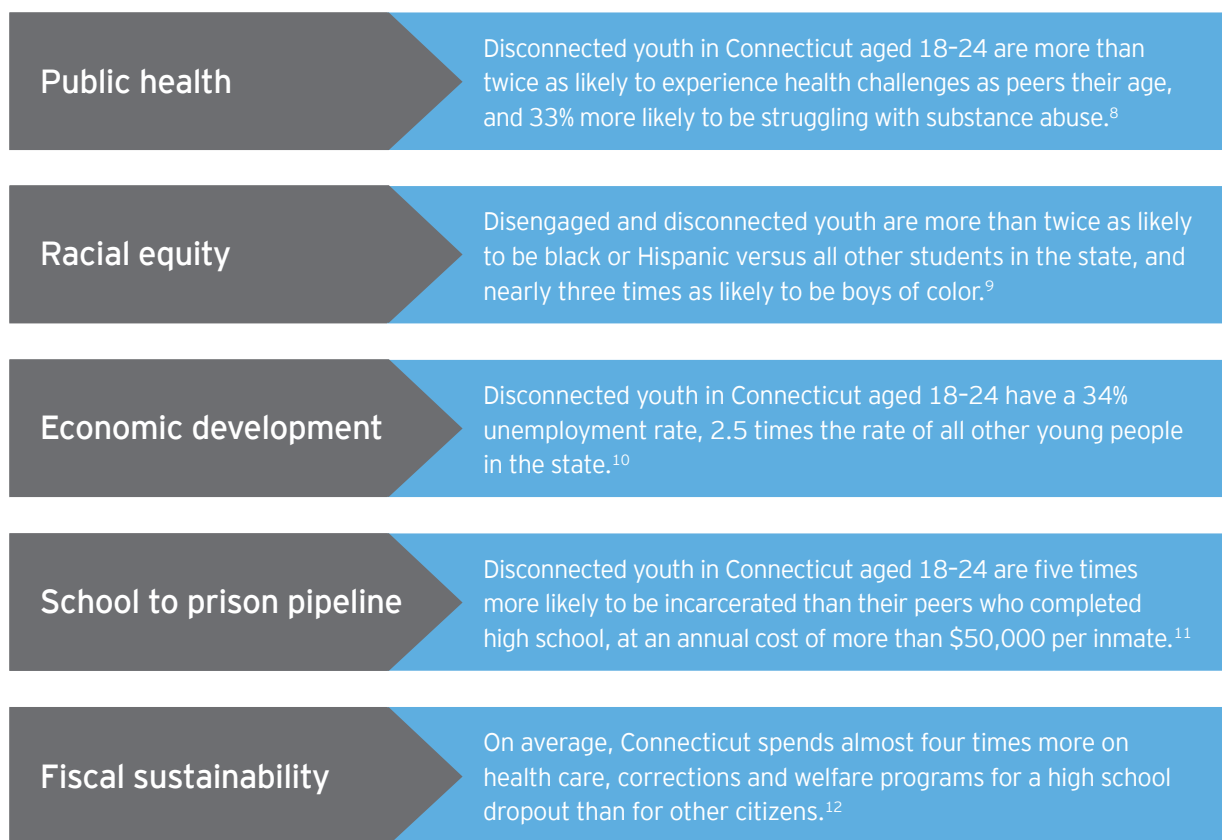
These long-term trends have only intensified in the wake of the Great Recession. Since 2010, the job market has made a very healthy recovery for those with higher education: nationwide, a 10% rise in total employment for associate degree holders and 16% growth for those with a bachelor’s degree or above – in sum, 8.3 million new jobs for these Americans.⁶ But for those without a high school degree, there has been **zero** change in employment and a small drop in total jobs over that same time period. In Connecticut,

where the unemployment rate has not recovered as fully as it has for the nation overall, the picture is even more stark. Since the bottom of the recession in 2010, 22,000 jobs have been created in the state for those with a bachelor’s degree or above – while 4,000 jobs were lost for those with less than a high school diploma.⁷

It is not an exaggeration to say that for disconnected youth, the Great Recession never ended. There has been no recovery. If Connecticut cannot find a way to re-engage these youth toward high school graduation and beyond, their chances of achieving future success are increasingly slim.

Beyond the consequences for individual youth, continued failure to meet the needs of disengaged and disconnected youth is strongly linked to a wide range of statewide civic and social issues that claim a diverse constituency

Figure 3: Social challenges related to disengaged and disconnected youth



in Connecticut and beyond, and that underlie prominent initiatives such as President Obama's My Brother's Keeper Initiative and Governor Malloy's Second Chance Society program.¹³ To provide a few examples, our research clearly shows how integral the disengaged and disconnected youth population is to understanding and solving issues of public health, racial equity, economic development, the school-to-prison pipeline and fiscal sustainability.

In short, finding ways to keep young people engaged in high school, and to re-engage young people who are disconnected, is an urgent need not just for the public education system, but also for the whole state.

Section 2:

The path from disengagement to disconnection



The goal of our research was to go beyond illustrating the scale and urgency of the need in Connecticut to identify patterns in the educational path of disengaged youth that can help shape potential solutions.

Looking at the pathways of these youth over time, we find that disengaged and disconnected youth are not two separate groups of students; rather, to a large extent, they are the *same students, just at different points in time*. In fact, 88% of all disconnected youth in Connecticut were previously disengaged in high school. We also find that disengagement is not a sudden event, but rather a process that often transpires over multiple years; typically, there is a two- to three-year window in which students are disengaged but still enrolled in high school before they become disconnected. By understanding this progression and monitoring students' engagement in real time, schools and other youth-serving organizations can help prevent youth from falling off track and support them toward a more promising path.

Once a student disconnects from high school in Connecticut, the odds that he or she effectively re-engages and earns a diploma are low. Of all students who dropped out of a Connecticut high school between 2012 and 2014:

- ▶ Only 12% ever re-enrolled in any public high school (including alternative schools).
- ▶ Only 1% ever attained a high school diploma.
- ▶ Only 9% achieved a GED or credit diploma through the adult education system.

These findings pose a dual challenge: the need for more high-quality supports for the 14,000 disconnected youth in Connecticut today that are at risk of falling into a cycle of poverty, absent help to get back on track; and the need for creative thinking and deeper investment in

new strategies, collaborations and program approaches to more effectively engage students while they are enrolled in school. The incentive is clear to focus heavily on preventing disengaged youth from becoming disconnected in the first place.

“High school dropouts are not happening in Connecticut without warning; students are progressing through an identifiable set of indicators. The more we know about where, when and how students become disengaged, and what happens before they disconnect, the better we – together – can be in changing their trajectories.”

– Dr. Manny Rivera, Superintendent,
New London Public Schools

Student attendance

So, what are the early warning signs of disengagement? Educators often look to measures of student attendance to identify early indicators of a student's disengagement from school. The relationship between attendance and engagement is well-understood – if students are not present in school, it is very difficult for them to engage and persist in their learning. Students with poor attendance, particularly when absences occur consecutively, can fall behind quickly and struggle to

catch up. They also are at risk of not forming strong peer and adult relationships, which, as we will discuss in more detail later in the report, are critical to keeping students engaged in their education.

From a data perspective, student attendance rates are often a more significant predictor of a student's likelihood of graduating high school than test scores or other academic measures. Indeed, the majority of students who are disengaged in high school have poor attendance as one of their disengagement factors. Not surprisingly, attendance worsens for students as they progress from disengagement to disconnection. One in four disengaged students has an attendance rate lower than 75%, an average of more than one missed day per week, or 45 total days over the school year. And this disengagement deepens as students get closer to the point of disconnecting from school: more than one in three disconnected youth had attendance lower than 75% in the year before dropping out. These are data that schools collect every day, and that can form the basis of targeted and effective interventions if used in a systematic fashion.

Student attendance is also highly correlated with another factor that dramatically impacts engagement: student mobility.

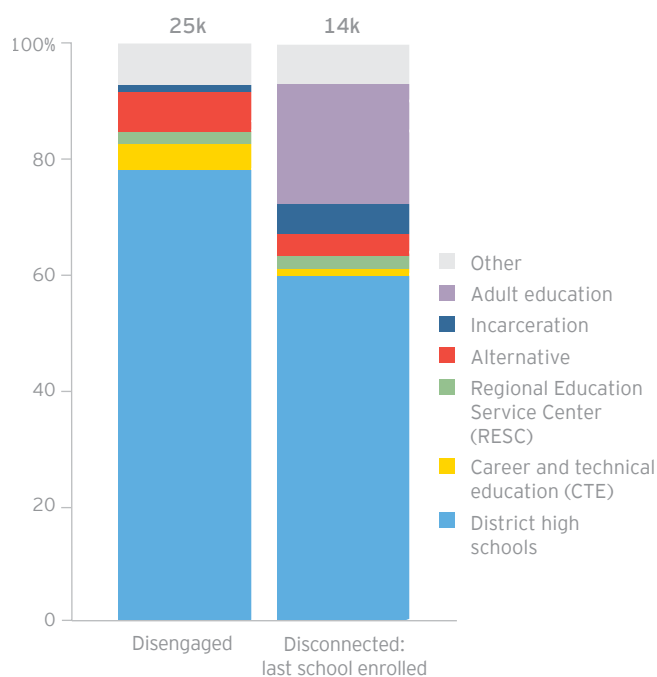
Student mobility

One of the most striking findings from our research is the degree to which disengaged and disconnected youth experience significant instability as they move through high school – specifically, they change schools at least once and often more than once, and often move between traditional district schools and other parts of the Connecticut education landscape.

There are two primary reasons why high mobility is problematic. First, schools and districts are often ill-prepared to keep track of students as they transition – both in terms of where they are and what they need. Second, similar to the effects of poor attendance, frequent school transfers also prevent students from forming strong relationships with peers and adults at school. Addressing the vulnerabilities created by high rates of mobility is of utmost importance for meeting the needs of this population.

Through our research, we saw hints of this mobility first when we looked at which schools serve disengaged youth, and how this mix changes over time. Looking back at where disengaged youth first enrolled in high school, we see that these students generally reflect

Figure 4: School type of disengaged and disconnected students, 2014-15



the mix of educational options in the state: 82% began in traditional district high schools, 6% in career and technical education (CTE) high schools and the remainder in a mix of options that includes Regional Education Service Center (RESC) high schools, special education (SPED) schools, charter schools and other educational models. In a snapshot view of disengaged youth during the 2014-15 school year, this picture remains more or less the same: at any given time, close to 80% of disengaged youth are still enrolled in traditional district high schools.

But when we compare this picture to where **disconnected** students were enrolled in their last point in high school (see Figure 4, left), we begin to get a sense of how much mobility is occurring after students become disengaged. In this final view, the share of youth enrolled in district high schools has declined to 54%, replaced by a mix of other schools and programs:

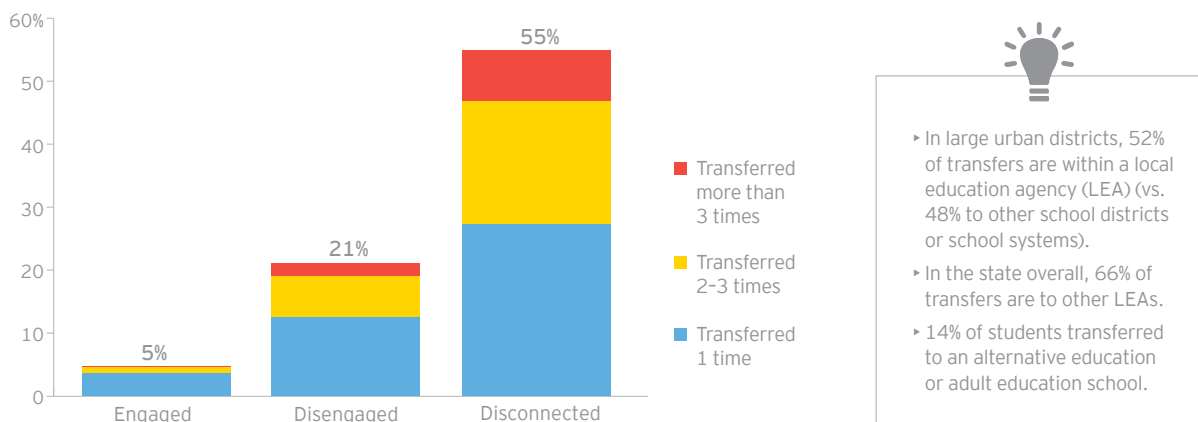
- 21% of disconnected youth transferred to an adult education program before disconnecting, which raises questions about the capacity of the adult education system to address the needs of these students.

- Visibly, the school-to-prison pipeline has already begun to emerge, with 5% of disconnected youth having last been enrolled in a school within an incarceration facility.
- Transfer to alternative schools appeared less frequently. In one example of the limited options that Connecticut has to serve disengaged and disconnected youth today, we note that the number of disconnected youth who were last served in an incarceration facility (although they represented only 5% of disconnected youth) exceeds the number last served in an alternative education school by nearly 40%.

Taking a deeper dive into the issue of mobility by looking at transfer data at the student level, the picture that emerges is even more stark.

The chart below (see Figure 5) shows rates of transfers among engaged students, disengaged students and disconnected students; how frequently does each student group transfer high schools in Connecticut? For students who remain engaged during high school, their experience is remarkably stable: 95% of these

Figure 5: Comparison of number of high school transfers among engaged, disengaged, disconnected youth, 2014-15



students remain in the same high school until graduation, and just over 1% transfer more than one time.

For disengaged youth, school transfers more than quadruple: 21% of these students have transferred during high school, and 9% have transferred more than once.

For disconnected youth, the frequency of school transfers is extraordinary: 55% of these students have changed high schools at least once, 11 times the rate experienced by engaged students. And 28% of disconnected youth transferred multiple times, 22 times the rate of engaged students. In large urban districts, about half of this transfer activity occurs within the district itself – from one school in the city to another. In the state overall, two thirds of these transfers are across school system lines.

While we are not able to discern from the data the rationale for this transfer activity in a quantitative way, we know qualitatively that these trends reflect multiple underlying factors. Without a doubt, difficult life circumstances for disconnected youth play a large role: less stable household structures, challenges with housing, homelessness and foster care, and higher rates of transience as families confront issues of poverty and safety are all issues that can represent everyday life for many of Connecticut's at-risk youth. At the same time, educators with whom we have met also recognize

the role that schools themselves can play: counseling students who are struggling to move to another school, sometimes in ways that are in the student's best interest and at other times in ways that may not be.

Whatever the specific factors are for any individual student, we know that higher rates of mobility dramatically decrease the chances of success in high school. When disengaged youth remain enrolled in a single school, they have a four-year graduation rate of 73%. But the more students change schools, the more this rate declines; for example, disengaged students who have transferred three or more times have only a 22% graduation rate.

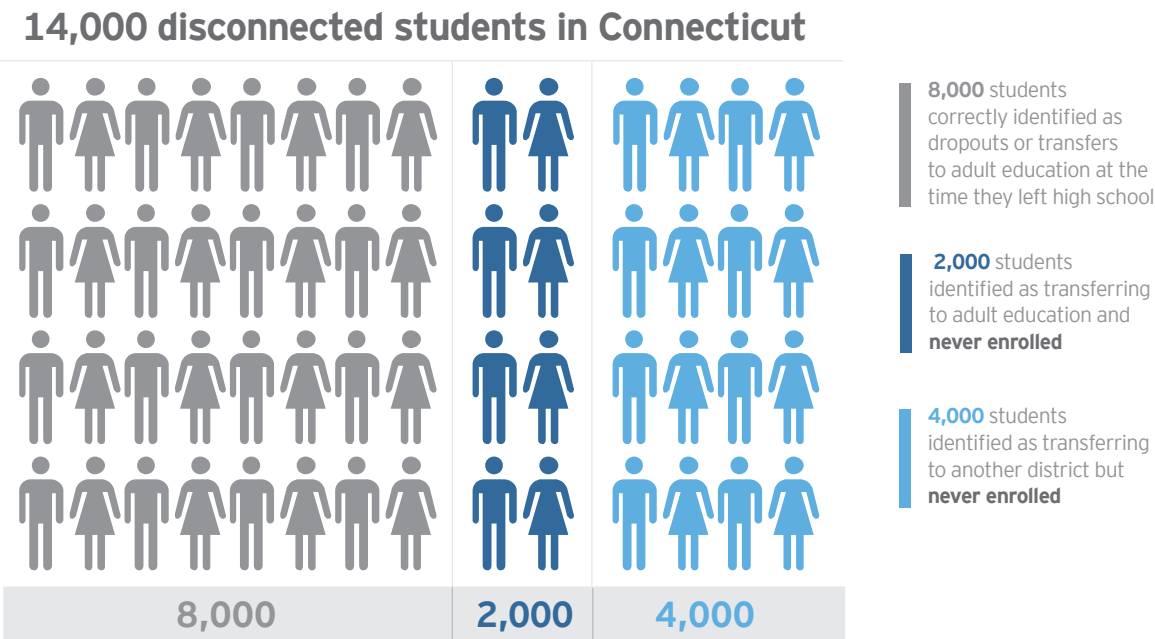
It is troubling enough that mobility leads to lower rates of graduation. Yet even more indicative of the challenge is the fact that schools today are often losing track of students as they move, allowing these youth to fall through the cracks without support or intervention.

The picture on the next page (see Figure 6) tells the story: of the 14,000 disconnected youth in Connecticut today, almost half – more than 6,000 youth – were identified by their school as transferring to either adult education or another district in the state. But our research confirms that these students never enrolled anywhere else in the state – not immediately after the point of transfer, or at any time since.

“I moved schools a few times, and it was really tough. My last high school wasn't sending all of my credits. I retok all of my classes that I didn't have to take. In the middle of the school year, they found my credits, and it was a huge waste of time.”

– Connecticut high school student

Figure 6: 2014-15 disconnected youth by last reported school exit



Unpacking the causes of this issue requires some nuance. These students often face rapid changes in their home or life situation that can make it hard for schools to know exactly what their next step will be. In some instances, this trend may reflect record-keeping errors at the school level. The CSDE reconciles this issue for accountability purposes when it measures cohort graduation rate (i.e., these students are eventually counted as a dropout from their last school, not as a transfer). Yet, as this calculation may take place several years after the student has been lost, there is still a missed opportunity to help students at the point of need.

While the issue of proper record-keeping could potentially be addressed through policy changes and data systems improvements, it is hard not to also view these results as a window into the challenges schools face in developing effective relationships with students who have struggled with their engagement in school. Points of transition between schools represent moments of heightened vulnerability for disengaged youth, as their decision to exit school is often prompted by life events, and their relationships with adults are being interrupted. These should be times when students are surrounded by even stronger supports, both in and out of school, but the data suggest this is not happening nearly enough.

Section 3:

Promising points of intervention



While many in the community will focus on earlier grade levels, or on disconnected youth who have left school, our research offers a strong rationale for more effective preventive work *during the high school years*. Roughly 90% of disconnected youth were identifiably disengaged during high school; if Connecticut can fix the problem of disengagement in its high schools, it would go a long way to also solving the problems of disconnection and high school dropout. Arguably, our most critical and promising finding – discussed later in this section – is the power of the first and second years of high school to shape the pathway of students and put them on a trajectory toward success. When schools and their community partners provide effective support, even students who enter ninth grade with risk factors can earn a high school diploma and be prepared for college.

The scale of the challenge of engaging all youth can seem daunting without finding the right entry points to focus attention and resources. Are there particular points in time in a student's progression through high school when schools and their partners can make the greatest

difference? Are there opportunities to concentrate energy and funds in a smart way around these intervention points? How can we empower educators in making the biggest difference for the most students?

Our research allowed us to analyze Connecticut's students at every point from eighth grade through high school graduation. Three findings emerged from our analysis of this progression:

1 The power of ninth grade

When students are disengaged entering high school, can they re-engage in ninth grade?

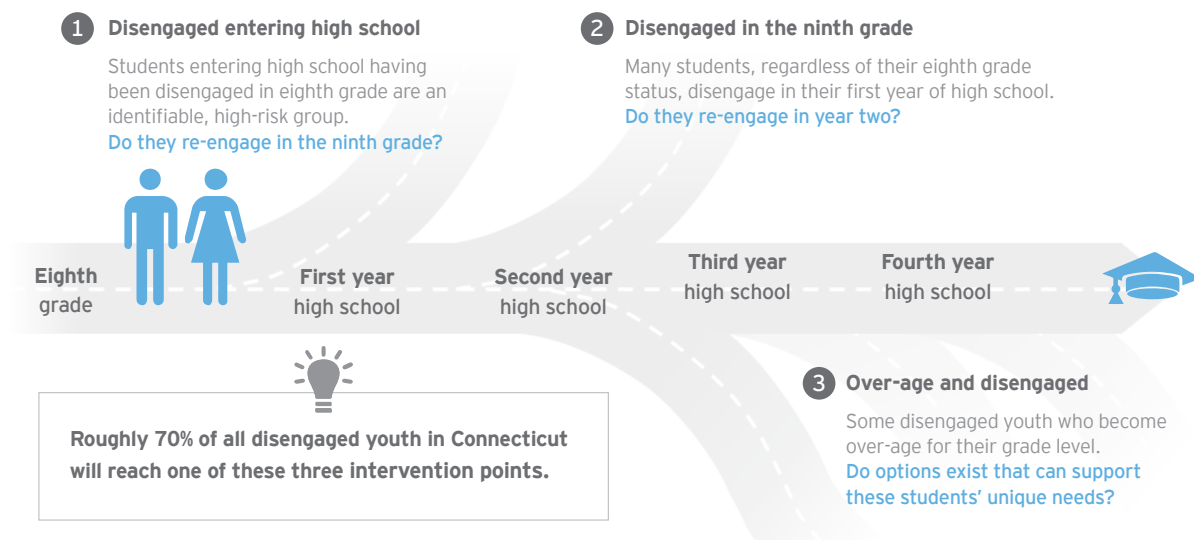
2 The second year is not too late

When students are disengaged in ninth grade, can they quickly reconnect in the second year?

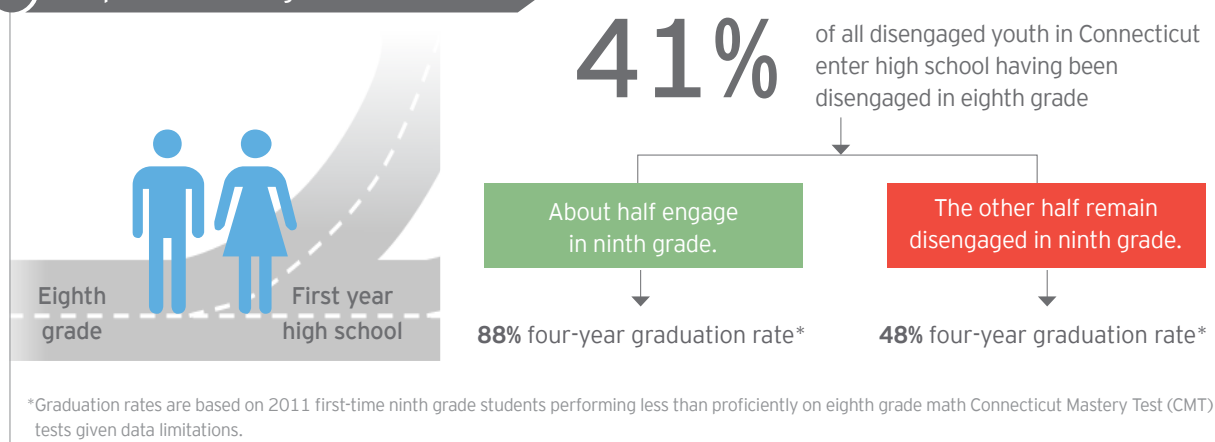
3 The unique needs of over-age students

When students become over-age and disengaged, are there effective options to meet their needs?

Figure 7: The road from eighth grade to high school graduation: promising points of intervention



1 The power of ninth grade



The power of ninth grade. The first point of intervention – for disengaged youth entering high school – contains an important insight about the role of middle school as a contributor to disengagement. It is common to hear, in conversations not just in Connecticut but across the country, that challenges in high school could be solved if only we could fix middle schools. This claim has merit; disengagement does occur for many students in sixth through eighth grade, and much important work needs to be done to improve middle schools, especially in high-need communities.

Yet, when we look at the attendance and behavior of students in eighth grade (the state does not collect course performance data in middle school), we also see that about 60% of students who become disengaged in high school were **engaged** during eighth grade. While there are some warning signs that are apparent during the middle school years (e.g., students who become disengaged in high school have lower middle school test scores and somewhat worse attendance), it is nonetheless the case that disengagement meaningfully deepens and accelerates for the majority of students during the high school years.

This fact brings us to the first of our three promising points of intervention: every school and district could identify their disengaged eighth graders and plan around their individual needs before the students enter high school. Over time, the CSDE could even provide this list of students to every district in a common and timely way. Taking this step would be enormously valuable, as the data reveal that the ninth grade year is critical for giving students a strong chance to succeed:

- ▶ Today, when a student enters high school having been disengaged in eighth grade, that student re-engages in ninth grade about 50% of the time.
- ▶ Students who do re-engage in ninth grade graduate at an 88% four-year rate compared to a rate of only 48% for students who do not re-engage in that year.

Successfully re-engaging a student who enters high school with a history of disengagement nearly doubles the student's odds of graduation – a larger impact than can be found at any other point in high school. Moreover, it suggests that an effective transition to high school and a strong experience in ninth grade are powerful enough for most students to overcome even a challenging history through the middle school years.

As part of our work in developing this report, we visited more than 20 schools across Connecticut to observe practices and hear directly from educators and leaders. We witnessed many committed and caring educators as

well as examples of strong practice. Consider East Hartford High School, a school that focuses heavily on the eighth-to-ninth-grade transition:

Transition to high school: East Hartford High School

The staff at East Hartford High School take a focused, data-driven approach to identifying and supporting students as they move through the entire high school program. Yet, they have zeroed in on the first year of high school, and the transition into ninth grade, as a key period of time to try to improve student success.

According to Matt Ryan, Principal of East Hartford High School: “We have a dedicated team of teachers, counselors and other staff who support ninth grade because we recognize the importance for our students. They begin monitoring student performance, including attendance and behavior, in eighth grade, and reach out quickly to make early connections with students.”

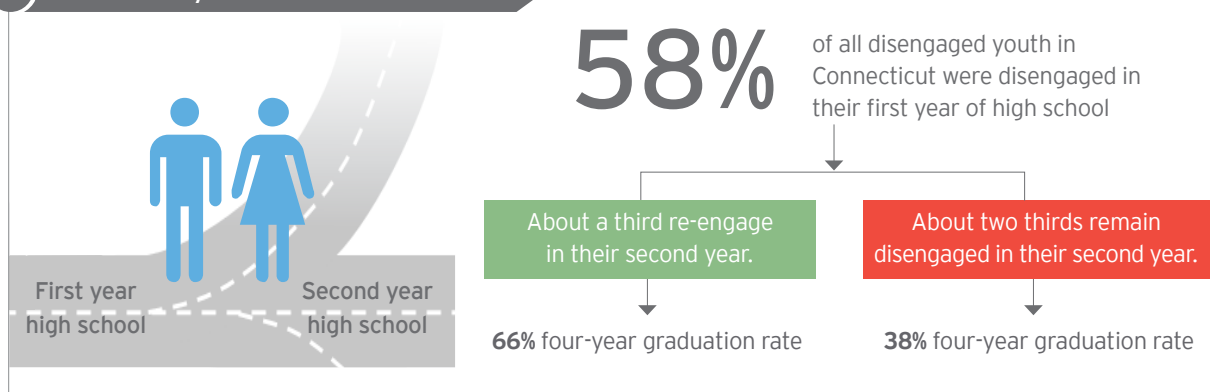
The ninth grade program at East Hartford High School functions largely as a school unto itself, except for electives and extracurricular activities, which allows the ninth grade team to focus entirely on the needs of this group of students. As students move through, the ninth grade team meets regularly to review students’ progress and identify interventions for students who are struggling. The core content area teachers apply their experience with this age group to develop strategies to effectively reach students at this point in their learning.

To promote continuity after ninth grade, East Hartford’s student support staff moves with the students through the remaining grade levels, developing close relationships that track each student’s overall development. “We are very intentional about creating meaningful relationships and connecting students with caring adults,” says Principal Ryan. “We coordinate school-based resources to support students with all levels of need – from navigating everyday teenage issues to working through issues related to substance abuse or homelessness.”

“If we engage our students at critical moments, we can almost double the odds of graduation for disengaged youth in Connecticut.”

– Nathan Quesnel, Superintendent, East Hartford Public Schools

2 The second year is not too late



The second year is not too late. If a student is disengaged in ninth grade, it is not too late for that student to get back on track toward graduation. Our second promising point of intervention focuses on the value of re-engaging these students in their second year of high school. In fact, about one third of students who were disengaged in ninth grade do successfully re-engage in their second year of high school – and those students have a 65% four-year graduation rate.

This rate, though lower than that of students who engage with school in ninth grade, is much higher than the 38% graduation rate of students who remain disengaged in their second year of high school.

Similar to our first promising point of intervention, we see that timely engagement of students at a critical moment can almost double the odds of graduation for disengaged youth. As we will discuss in the next section



of this report, there are well-established research and leading practices that describe approaches schools can adopt to dramatically improve student engagement and outcomes in the first two years of high school.

In Connecticut, one such example is the way that Francis Maloney High School in Meriden uses data combined with frequent meetings of cross-discipline staff to create individual plans for struggling students.

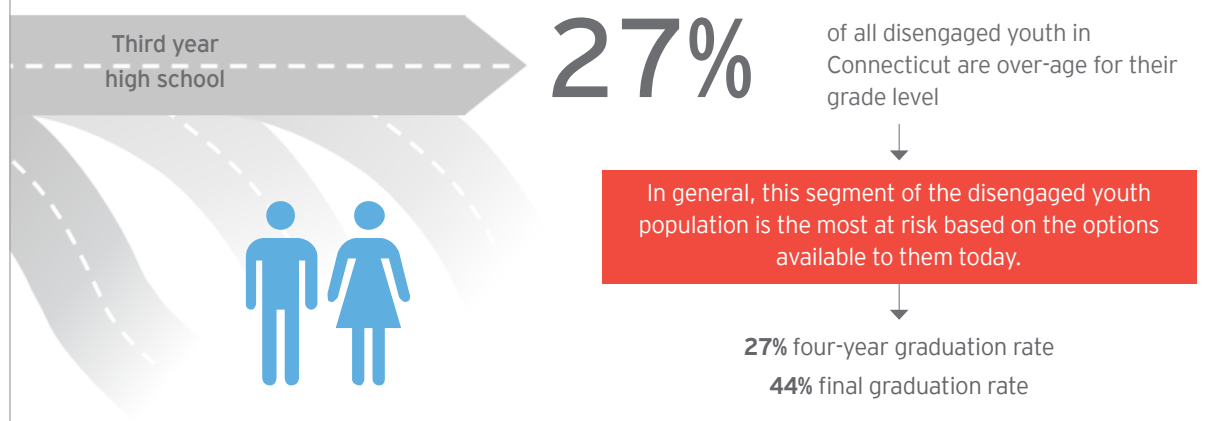
Re-engage continuing high school students: Francis Maloney High School

At Francis Maloney High School, staff are cultivating a culture in which all students feel welcome and all students participate in the life of the school. There is an emphasis on keeping students in school, even if they are having a hard time, so that they can access support and get back on track. Large-scale efforts like scheduling student classes in an inclusive way, and smaller-scale efforts like enabling broad participation in school plays, music programs and other activities, combine to provide opportunities for students to be an active part of the school community.

“Whether through courses, clubs or connections to caring adults, our teachers are committed to making Maloney a place where students are excited to come to school every day and feel part of a true learning community where on-time graduation and college readiness are expectations for all students,” according to Jennifer Straub, Principal of Francis Maloney High School.

There are also formal structures in place to bring together teams of teachers, counselors and other staff to regularly review student progress. Anyone can add a student to the agenda of team meetings, and the purpose is to get a holistic view of the student’s situation, identifying specific challenges and areas of struggle, finding the root causes of these challenges and agreeing on intervention steps. The team assesses progress at the next meeting and determines whether to stay on the same course, or to adjust, based on how the student is responding.

3 The unique needs of over-age students



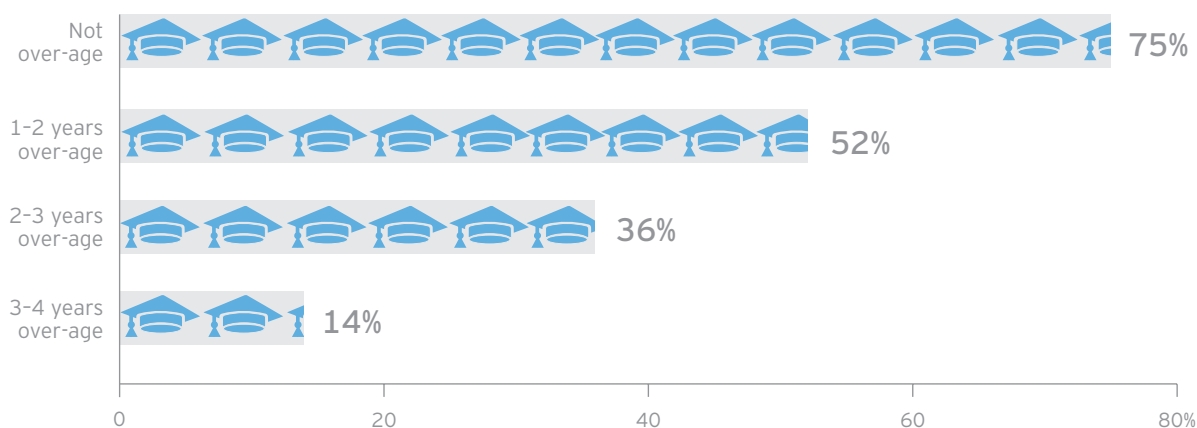
The unique needs of over-age students. Our third point of intervention highlights the needs of disengaged youth who become over-age for their grade level – for example, a 16- or 17-year-old who has not earned enough credits to be promoted from ninth grade, or a 19-year-old who still needs one to two years of coursework in order to graduate. Over-age and disengaged youth typically have more intensive and individualized academic and social-emotional needs than their peers. Evidence and national research indicate that these students often benefit from a school setting designed and resourced to restart their education, building academic competencies along with resiliency and perseverance. Indeed, where school systems nationally have made the most progress with disengaged and disconnected youth, it is often by adopting a “multiple pathways to graduation” philosophy that includes stronger preventive work within traditional high schools, as well as intentionally designed schools and programs with recuperative strategies for over-age students.

By contrast, the outcomes that we observe for over-age and disengaged students speak to the paucity of high-quality recuperative options in Connecticut today. Over-age and disengaged youth have only a 27% four-year graduation rate and a 44% graduation rate over a six- to seven-year time period (since more time is often required for these students to graduate given the degree to which they have fallen behind). When we break down this statistic by the degree to which a student is over-age, we see that graduation rates plummet as students become increasingly over-age.

To the extent that options do exist for these students today, some transfer to an alternative school or program, or – in far larger numbers – to the adult education system. In our visits to such schools, we



Figure 8: Estimated six-year graduation rate of disengaged students, by age relative to grade level, fall 2011



found that there are significant questions to be raised about how students are counseled to these schools, the level of instructional rigor of their academic programs and the availability of social-emotional supports. Importantly, these observations are generally not the fault of the educators in these schools; in the case of adult education, for example, these programs are typically funded at just a fraction of a traditional district school. Overall, these programs were likely not designed to serve the thousands of teenage students they do today, with the significant academic and non-academic needs of this population.

Over time, the greatest investment and impact for Connecticut should come from preventive strategies that keep students from becoming disengaged or over-age in the first place. But those investments will not address the thousands of youth who are already disengaged – plus thousands more disconnected – and who are therefore on the precipice of entering adulthood without the preparation they need to succeed. The need to develop school options that can effectively re-engage these students could not be more immediate.

OPPortunity Academy in Hartford offers an example of a school model built around the needs of over-age, disengaged youth.

“Once I graduate, that sets the bar for my little brother and my little sister. My parents never graduated, and it’s a big accomplishment. I never would have thought I would make it to senior year, but I got back on track, and now I’m about to graduate.”

– Connecticut high school student

Re-engage over-age disengaged students: OPPportunity Academy

At OPPportunity Academy in Hartford, staff work to build a strong academic and social-emotional culture within the school, and to create connections between school and work or college. One student describes her experience: “We visited a bunch of colleges to get a feel for what college would be like. I talked about my college goals with my guidance counselor, and she helped fill out my applications.”

With similar models in Windham and Bloomfield, Our Piece of the Pie’s OPPportunity Academy aims to give students opportunities to make real inroads into possible careers through internships and career exploration opportunities. Some of these experiences are structured so that they meet state academic crediting requirements, allowing students to progress toward a high school diploma while working and learning. “The standard educational batch system will not work for students who are far behind. Building a relationship and launching a young person into student-centered learning with appropriate support does work,” says Bob Rath, CEO at Our Piece of the Pie.

Relationship building and a personalized approach are fundamentally important areas of focus at OPPportunity Academy. Students are older than their intended grade, often between 16 and 21 years old, so dedicated advocates or youth development specialists are an important way to provide support to students in a way that is more developmentally appropriate. Academic instruction emphasizes a mix of teachers addressing individual student needs as well as online learning. The goal is to accelerate students’ progress toward graduation, and to best meet the needs of a wide range of students. The blended approach provides opportunities for students to take control of their learning, with the potential to manage their schedule and pace as they progress.

In summary, while there are many challenges that students face in their earlier years, high school is not too late to make an impact on a student’s life. There is real opportunity to meaningfully change a student’s trajectory for the better as students transition into

high school for the first time and then continue on throughout their high school years. For over-age disengaged youth, these students also have strong potential if given adequate supports to succeed.



Section 4: Changing the youth experience



One of the largest obstacles to progress in helping disengaged and disconnected youth can be a sense that the challenge is too daunting to take on, or that it's too late to help underserved disengaged and disconnected youth; that the education community should focus its attention elsewhere to make a difference. The promising points of intervention reviewed in the last section of this report highlight the possibility of effective action. For educators and others who work with young people, these points can serve as guideposts around which educators put in place the kinds of systems and practices that help students stay on track, or intervene with those who have fallen off track.

The promising points of intervention suggest **when and where** investment might be focused. The hard work is to transform the experience that youth have through these moments of potential impact.

It is critical to recognize that educators and leaders in Connecticut are far from starting from scratch in addressing this challenge. Within the state, there are examples of effective practice happening at a small

scale, many of which we saw or heard about firsthand during our research. And across the country, there is a wealth of research and experience from which to draw.

Our visits and conversations across the state reinforced the importance of a commitment to a shared vision of every student in Connecticut graduating with the knowledge and skills needed for post-secondary success. That shared vision can become the foundation of a statewide conversation, informed by the voices of the students and those who work with them, by this data, by an understanding of the failures of the system that inhibit students' attachment to school and by research on promising practices to support engagement. What do we know about how students connect with school and commit to their own learning? When even one disengaged student can effectively attach to school, what builds that connection?

To start the conversation, our research and experience identify three common themes. When schools and programs are effectively reaching disengaged and disconnected youth, they demonstrate:



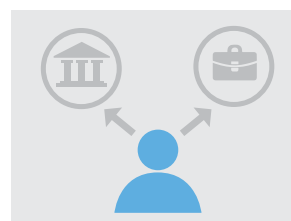
Personalization

Designing and organizing schools to build around each student's individual needs



Relationships

Fostering trusting and supportive relationships with adults and other students



Connections

Building students' sense of how to connect with the larger world

These three themes are core to successful engagement for both disengaged and disconnected youth. They can be applied across each of the three promising intervention points identified in this report. They reflect a balance between critical academic strategies (especially in how schools can personalize their approach to meeting those needs) and the primacy of social and emotional needs among this population. Indeed, increasingly robust research suggests that a

“It is never too late to support our students. Schools focusing on personalization of instruction, relationships with caring adults and connections to career or higher education can significantly improve the high school experience for all students.”

– Mark Benigni, EdD, Superintendent,
Meriden Public Schools

strong foundation of social-emotional learning and experiences is a necessary gateway for students to re-engage effectively with school.

One recent study of ninth grade students, for example, showed that non-cognitive factors of student engagement predicted outcomes such as college enrollment, likelihood of arrest and long-term earnings even more strongly than test scores.¹⁴ The balance between academic and social-emotional learning is not a choice between one or the other; rather, the strongest schools and programs show how a youth development approach can be deeply integrated and mutually reinforcing with the academic strategy of a school.

The importance of personalization, relationships and connections is not new to educators who have worked with adolescents. Yet, as a system, these factors are often in short supply. In this section, we offer brief descriptions of effective practice in each of these areas, including some examples from schools and programs in Connecticut and elsewhere that are showing signs of promising work. Our goal is not to illustrate in prescriptive detail how each community should approach its work; we hope instead to spark a conversation around how people working with youth in and out of schools can develop these three themes as integral facets of their own efforts.



Personalization

The high school of today is charged with preparing all students for some form of post-secondary education in order for them to find success in the 21st century economy and in life. This ambitious goal for standards of learning is necessary for young people's futures, yet it is a new and demanding responsibility for high schools that, in the past, often expected many of their students to work in jobs requiring only a high school diploma.

The task of meeting these high expectations cannot be placed on individual educators alone. Effective strategies for personalization are not a matter of superhuman educators, but of whole schools and programs that – by virtue of their structures and supports – enable adults to be responsive to the needs of individual young people. We offer the following examples of effective strategies:

- Use of performance data allows schools to begin early in meeting student needs. By identifying and understanding each individual cohort of students starting before they enter ninth grade, assessing their academic strengths and growth areas, and organizing ninth grade so that teachers can get to know their students and respond to their academic challenges, schools can increase motivation and stimulate engagement and effort by students. Beyond ninth grade, these approaches help to identify students who are falling off track at the first indication of trouble and respond immediately. Work done by educators over the last decade at New York City's High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology serves as

a model for this kind of practice by tracking each individual student's progress toward graduation semester by semester and focusing the immediate energy of educators and staff on those students who have fallen behind.¹⁵

- Effective high schools support students by regularly bringing together teams of educators and counselors – often organized by groups of students that educators share, prioritizing common planning time – to develop individual strategies for each student falling off track (including both academic and social-emotional strategies) and to monitor the progress of those students along the way. When most effective, this practice becomes part of the fabric and culture of the school. Teams, in turn, must be able to draw on supports, resources and strategies aligned to common needs of disengaged and disconnected youth. These include academic foundations of improving adolescent literacy and core mathematics – areas where recent studies have greatly enhanced the field's understanding of what works, such as the *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research*.¹⁶



These strategies and collaborations should also include wraparound services that help students access a wide range of supports (e.g., nutrition, mental health, child care) that may be needed to keep them engaged as healthy learners.

- A focus on personalization and responsiveness should be heightened at points of greatest importance for students: most prominently, the first year of high school. Concentrating resources on the ninth grade year (e.g., building ninth grade teams of teachers and other staff, having the strongest teachers working in ninth grade classes) is shown in our data to be the

most promising investment a high school can make in helping disengaged youth; and cities around the country have shown strong results from sustained implementation of similar strategies focused on ninth grade. Chicago, for example, has been a leader, both in understanding the data around the power of ninth grade and in strengthening programmatic strategies for keeping students on track through that first year. There, increasing ninth grade on-track rates by 10% in 2008 led to a subsequent increase of up to 20% in graduation rates in 2011, controlling for incoming achievement levels across student cohorts.¹⁷





Relationships

As many educators and analysts have observed, the typical model of high school in America was built for a different era and reflects a standardized approach to the student experience that is especially ill-designed to meet the diverse and more intensive needs of disengaged and disconnected youth. All too often, when students are off track in high school, their struggles may be noted by individual educators, but the organization of the school inhibits a more comprehensive and tailored response: students who are failing receive more of the same.

When students struggle with factors outside of school, or when their academic situation is challenging, it is often the strength of their relationships with peers and adults both in and out of school that can determine whether they remain connected and get back on track, or whether their disengagement spirals further. Schools that are succeeding with high-need youth work systematically to create trusting and supportive connections with other students and with

adults, both within their own staff and by connecting with community organizations that can provide those relationship supports outside of school time. Consider the following examples:

- ▶ As with personalization, a focus on relationships can be accentuated as students make the transition to high school. Effective summer bridge programs between eighth and ninth grade help introduce students to future teachers and classmates, make them comfortable with the culture of the school and plant the seeds for ongoing relationships. Bridge programs are even more valuable when complemented by advisory structures during the school year that maintain focused attention on students' needs throughout the ninth grade (and beyond) while providing the stability of particular staff members working with youth.
- ▶ Extracurricular opportunities and enrichment programs, including arts, athletics and other pursuits, provide students with a peer group aligned to their own passions and interests, while creating another group of adults (e.g., coaches) upon whom students can rely for support. Schools should make these opportunities available to all students and work to connect students entering high school with identifiable risk factors to programs as soon as possible. Like

“ If it wasn't for my guidance counselor, I wouldn't be graduating. No one ever told me I could do it before. When I first met my guidance counselor, we set goals; she always pushed me, and she believed in me. ”

– Connecticut high school student

many Connecticut high schools, New London High School offers a variety of extracurricular opportunities for its students, including a multicultural club that takes field trips to historical sites and a marching band that provides opportunities for students to perform at the University of Connecticut.¹⁸ Similarly, non-profit organizations like the YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs help students form connections with caring adults and peers in their community.

- Especially for students who are multiple years over-age for their grade level, successful alternative school models often include an intensive focus on relationship building with a case management approach. These schools have and prioritize the resources to employ advocate counselors (or other similar titles) – individuals who are trained in youth development and who focus exclusively on helping students work through academic or non-academic issues. Studies suggest that placing case management support staff in alternative settings leads to increases in self-regulation and self-esteem among students, as well as increases in school attendance and grade point average – guideposts of student persistence and engagement.¹⁹ In Stamford, Domus focuses on the importance of positive relationships in the family advocacy model it employs at its schools, with regular home visits to help parents and families fully engage with a student's education and individualized action plans to help families receive

the proper supports. In school, family advocates also work with students to set goals and priorities, to develop their social emotional skills and to connect them with other community resources that might be helpful to them.

- For all students, and particularly for at-risk youth, using appropriate responses to behavior issues and prioritizing restorative practices are vital to promoting a positive relationship between students and the adults in their school. Too often, students who struggle with behavior are suspended, further setting them back academically. Instead, taking time and care to form relationships with students to discuss their actions, the roots of their behaviors, what this means for them and how their behavior impacts others can help improve a student's outlook on school. In Connecticut, the American Federation of Teachers has highlighted the importance of restorative practices by awarding its New Haven chapter a grant specifically focusing on these practices and school discipline, and New Haven's Youth Stat has woven these practices into its comprehensive approach for keeping students engaged in school.^{20 21}



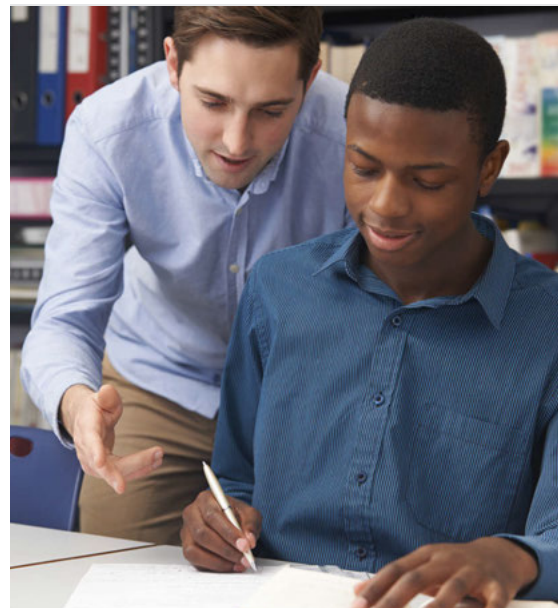
Connections

When students are struggling with engagement, helping them persist and succeed through high school means helping them see the relevance of their education to what they could do outside of school, and expanding their sense of what is possible for their own success in college or career. Adolescents who are engaged in school forge an academic identity that they understand as tied to a vision for their future. By contrast, many disengaged youth struggling in school have had limited exposure to the broad world of careers and lack relationships with potential role models. Internships, service learning and connections to a broader world through use of technology can all promote positive identities and engagement with education. Moreover, as students get older, their life circumstances often dictate that they may need to be able to work – meaning that schools need to help students maintain employment without compromising their education.

- Connecting students to the world around them requires that the students themselves begin to set their own vision and goals. For schools and districts, this work can start as soon as the upper elementary or middle school grades – engaging students in a goal-setting process, developing individual plans for what they want to learn and achieve academically as well as outside the classroom and then making those plans real, living documents through high school graduation.²² Initiatives like Thrive by 25 in Fairfield and organizations like the Urban League help Connecticut's youth think about and plan for their future, while instilling important life skills such as

financial literacy. Students participating in the Urban League of Southern Connecticut, for example, participate in workforce development programs and the Urban Youth Empowerment Program, which creates a community of learning with support in workshops to prepare students for employment.²³

- Individual goal setting goes hand in hand with fostering a college-going culture and enabling all students – regardless of economic or family background – to have a clear picture of what that means. Schools that successfully develop this culture incorporate it into their day-to-day interactions (e.g., having teachers promote their own college experience), feature trips that expose students to different college environments and intensively support students through each aspect of the preparation, application and selection process. For example, Norwalk Early College Academy, a six-year academy, is a collaboration between Norwalk Public Schools, Norwalk Community College and IBM that offers students a smooth transition from high school



to work and higher education, teaching important career skills throughout the six-year experience. By creating a full model that directly supports students while linking their high school experience to higher education, Norwalk Early College Academy creates a college-going culture that permeates every student's experience.²⁴

- Especially for older students and disconnected youth, connections to work are valuable to integrate into the school model – whether directly, through internships, career mentors and specific skill development, or indirectly by scheduling classes in ways that allow students to maintain employment. In this area, out-of-school programs that focus on disconnected youth can be a model and a facilitator; for example, national programs such as Job Corps and Year Up or local programs such as the Hartford Youth Service Corps. Many of these programs provide the first exposure students have to work and offer a stipend that helps keep students engaged, as well as skills and a perspective that can propel their future. In Connecticut, the Hartford Youth Service Corps creates

opportunities for 200 young adults to help with service projects, such as cleaning up parks, while earning a paycheck and contributing to their community.²⁵

Among personalization, relationships and connections, there exists a wealth of research and leading practices from which to draw to dramatically improve outcomes for disengaged and disconnected youth. The challenge for educators is that these practices don't function as an *a la carte* menu; there is no simple solution, and the need in Connecticut is substantial enough that simply adopting any individual program is not enough to make a meaningful difference. Schools and the community organizations that support them need to think comprehensively about how they can integrate all three themes into a broad reimagining of the youth experience. We also have to recognize that educators must be aided in that rethinking by conditions and resources that enable progress and innovation. Schools cannot solve these issues on their own. Those enabling conditions and resources are the focus of our next section.





Section 5: Conditions for success



The facts and research that we have shared illustrate the scale of the challenge in Connecticut, and offer some insight into how the pathways of disengaged and disconnected youth present opportunities for action and intervention. In every school and community, there are passionate and caring adults working hard to make a difference for young people. Individual success stories are indeed happening every day across Connecticut. But changing the experience and outcomes for *all* students requires more than the commitment and work of individual educators and schools.

The scale and systemic nature of the need that we see in Connecticut call for broad coalitions of stakeholders that focus on both *preventive* strategies that keep youth from disengaging and *recuperative* strategies that support them before and after they disconnect. In an ideal world, schools and communities would be able to concentrate all their attention on prevention.

However, with more than one out of every five students in Connecticut disengaged or disconnected, there will be thousands of young adults needing recuperative supports for years to come.

Which strategies ultimately have the most promise? The answers to that question will have to come from leaders at all levels within Connecticut: the educators who work with youth every day, the school and district leaders who allocate resources, the non-profit teams whose experience and assistance are critical to a comprehensive solution, and the system leaders who can make broad system-level changes. What this report offers is a framework from which those answers might arise and a set of recommendations that invite further invention, thinking and conversation.

The three key components that offer the conditions for success are:



Practice

Stronger practice in schools



Systems

Improved systems that support disengaged and disconnected youth



Future research

A coordinated research agenda to better understand the roots of the challenge and the potential strategies to more effectively support these young people



Practice

The previous section of this report offers a range of leading practices that schools can consider in order to change the experience of disengaged and disconnected youth through their high school years. Yet the landscape of public education in Connecticut stands out for its fragmentation: the population of disengaged and disconnected youth is dispersed across 151 school systems and roughly 450 individual schools – spread across traditional districts, RESCs, CTE schools, charters, alternative schools, adult education programs and more. To some extent, student needs must be evaluated and met on a classroom-by-classroom basis. But is there any way to accelerate progress by helping as many schools and educators as possible implement leading practice with the students they serve?

This report offers a few ideas:

1. Create strong collaborative networks and supports for educators: Our research highlights the opportunity for state, regional and local networks to support professional learning around strategies to serve disengaged and disconnected youth. In visiting schools – especially alternative high schools and programs – we were impressed by the commitment that educators have for serving all youth, but also struck by the extent to which these educators appeared to lack systematic support to help build their understanding of research-based strategies and leading practices for this population. Educators who

focus their work on disengaged and disconnected youth appear to have no clear community to turn to in Connecticut to share knowledge, gain feedback or improve their craft. Given the scale and urgency of the need, one could imagine a larger, more focused and more organized professional development role for a range of potential organizations, including the CSDE, statewide teacher unions, RESCs, districts and non-profit organizations.

2. Design high school systems and models tailored to student needs: Even as Connecticut seeks to build the capacity of educators, it is also necessary to recognize the role that school structure plays in affecting the odds of success for disengaged and disconnected youth. National research has clearly demonstrated the role that school size and concentration of poverty can play in shaping student outcomes; all else being equal (including demographics and preparation levels of students themselves), youth who attend large schools with a high concentration of poverty graduate at much lower rates.²⁶ Many of Connecticut's urban districts face just this challenge with their high schools, with large comprehensive high schools whose size is a barrier to personalization and relationships, and face a concentration of need that is intensified by surrounding magnet and selective schools. These same communities often face the highest rates of leadership turnover at the district and school level. In these settings, where the level of challenge is high and the organizational capacity to drive and sustain significant changes in practice may be low, the question may not be how to improve outcomes of disengaged youth per se, but rather how to create more effective organizational systems and models for those high schools overall.

3. Build more high-quality schools and programs to serve over-age disengaged and disconnected youth:

Connecticut faces a need for new ideas and new models to serve over-age disengaged and disconnected youth. With few examples of promising organizations, the options in alternative education and adult education schools and programs are generally not working any better than the comprehensive high schools from which their students disengaged. By contrast, when we studied the needs of over-age and under-credited youth in New York City, we found alternative schools that were graduating off-track students at about three times the rate of comprehensive high schools.²⁷ There are leading-practice schools that can inform some of the key design parameters: a youth development approach, capacity for high-quality case management, targeted instructional practices to address gaps in knowledge and skills, a flexible learning environment that can accelerate progress toward graduation and connections to work. But Connecticut will need an infusion of resources and dedicated leaders to create new evidence-based models within the state.





Systems

Systems at the state and local level can help create the right supporting conditions for serving disengaged and disconnected youth. In the past couple of years, Connecticut has taken some important steps in improving accountability by assigning school codes to alternative programs and accurately capturing student enrollment information. However, there is much further to go. This report highlights three potential areas of focus at a systems level:

previous legislation. Many states and districts have incorporated indicators of disengaged youth into their data systems so that key analyses can be replicated more easily, and so that the needs of this population can be monitored over time more consistently. With stronger infrastructure and systems in place, it would be easier for schools to understand the needs of their students, for teachers to plan and personalize strategies before school starts to support students who have previously exhibited signs of disengagement, and for school leaders to have access to real-time data early and continuously to apply that information to drive practice and target interventions.

“Using smart public policy to get disengaged and disconnected young people back on the path to education and employment is one of the most important things we can do to build stronger, safer, more equitable and more resilient communities.”

– Luke Bronin, Mayor of Hartford

1. Improve data infrastructure: The kind of data and information that our team collected, assembled and analyzed to produce this report should be available to educators in timely ways to help inform their daily practice. This issue is especially relevant for Connecticut at a time when new responsibilities under the Every Student Succeeds Act are likely to create conversations around state infrastructure for data and accountability, with states now given a more central role in setting their own ways of monitoring and supporting their districts and schools than under

Finally, to the extent possible, Connecticut should aim to strengthen interagency data sharing at the state level (e.g., juvenile justice, housing, child welfare) to deepen the collective understanding of the unique needs of disengaged youth and to develop productive strategies for addressing those needs at scale. Rhode Island, for example, has already taken on interagency data sharing through its Rhode Island Data Sharing Project, which connects data and ideas from government agencies and local organizations to help communities through research such as identifying

schools with large numbers of students at risk for juvenile justice involvement.²⁸ Such interagency data sharing has been a focus of New Haven through its Youth Stat program, which connects people and information across organizations, including the local school district, police department, fire department and educators, to facilitate conversations and strategies tailored to help individual youth with challenges they face in and out of school.²⁹

2. Strengthen enrollment, transfer and attendance policies: State and local systems should work to enable schools to know every student, providing that students' educational needs are being met through points of transition where students are particularly vulnerable to disengagement and disconnection. As we discussed in section 2, only 55% of Connecticut's 14,000 disconnected youth received an accurate discharge code in the state data system. The remaining 45% were recorded as transferring to another school within Connecticut or to the adult education system, though neither turned out to be the case. Needless to say, this pattern is the very embodiment of the system letting students fall between the cracks.

One potential remedy is to allow transfer codes to be used only upon confirmation that students have actually re-enrolled elsewhere. While inaccurate discharge codes clearly represent a data problem, they also represent a human problem in the evident lack of follow-up to make sure an exiting student has successfully engaged with his or her new school. As such, the CSDE and local school districts should consider how to create stronger protocols for when schools are allowed to discharge students and what outreach and engagement they must have with students, their families and the receiving school before completing their transfer.

Another idea for consideration involves local attendance policies. When recording attendance, a school can either set the default attendance setting to *present* or *absent*. When the default is set to *present*, and a school does not intentionally mark missing students as absent, the attendance rate for both the student and the school is inflated. The school loses key data it could use to help identify and support students who are missing school. Currently, the default setting varies by school in Connecticut. When data is captured in an accurate way, dashboards using this information can enable practitioners to spot patterns of absence early and consistently, supporting early intervention. As the state's next-generation accountability system incorporates attendance as a key metric to evaluate schools and districts, it is important that all schools default students to *absent* to provide equitable treatment of all schools and accurate records for all students.



3. Increase investment and accountability for serving the most at-risk youth:

Students who are over-age need comprehensive school options, often outside of traditional schools, that are built around their academic and social-emotional needs. Both common sense and benchmarks from other states suggest that serving these students effectively requires a greater level of investment – but in Connecticut today, the reverse often applies. Adult education, which is a predominant destination for disengaged youth who leave traditional district schools, is funded at a fraction of the average high school cost per pupil. Similarly, alternative schools are often structured as programs within traditional schools, and as such, their funding varies from district to district; though it has often appeared during school visits that many struggle for adequate staffing and resources.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that more resources be directed toward existing programs without a shift in expectations around the effectiveness of those programs. As part of a broader effort to stimulate innovations and stronger programs for over-age disengaged and disconnected youth, Connecticut could consider a weighted per-pupil formula that

would provide funding commensurate with the level of support these students require – in exchange for a rigorous and appropriate approach to accountability that is tailored for the way in which schools serve students. The key in designing effective measures for this population is to avoid creating school-level disincentives for serving high-need students, and to reward those that can demonstrate progress and clear signs of student re-engagement (e.g., positive changes in attendance rates relative to those at the student's prior school, acceleration of credit accumulation versus prior year).

In addition, it may make sense to measure graduation outcomes over six years instead of four, since students often arrive at these schools several years into high school and meaningfully off track in terms of graduation requirements. While the six-year graduation rate for high-need students is currently part of the CSDE's next-generation evaluation framework for all schools, the relative weights of importance in accountability could be adjusted for alternative schools to better reflect the needs of the students served.





Future research

We have found that the more questions we are able to answer about disengaged and disconnected youth in Connecticut, the more new questions arise. No single report can hope to address all of the questions that are important to inform a statewide conversation and catalyze a pattern of dramatic and continuous improvement. But we hope that our work contributes to an ongoing dialogue focused on the needs of disengaged and disconnected youth. The priorities for this dialogue must be determined collectively through further engagement of relevant stakeholders, but we offer several issues that seem to us to be crucial to any further advances in strategies to meet the needs of these youth:

1. Explore disengagement and disconnection along the K-12 continuum: While disengagement and disconnection become more prevalent and severe in the high school years, signs of disengagement and disconnection can be observed in middle school or even earlier for some students. More research is needed to understand the patterns and paths of disengagement and disconnection throughout a student's K-12 experience. For example, how much disengagement and disconnection can be seen by third grade, by sixth grade and through middle school? What early warning signs can be observed, and how can they be addressed?

2. Understand connection to post-secondary:

High school graduation is no longer the desired final destination for students, nor does it represent a promise of post-secondary success. Today's labor market requires post-secondary education, whether that is a four-year college, an associate degree or a career and technical certification. Yet, many students are not prepared for the rigors of higher education, and the transitional challenge to higher education is often even more significant than the transition to high school. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse can help answer questions about the frequency of students' matriculation and persistence through higher education and whether they graduate with a two-year or four-year degree. Such research would spotlight the true gap between high school graduation and college success and the implications of the gap on a student's likelihood to succeed in the workforce.



3. Champion youth voice: Research that uncovers the experiences of current high school students, disconnected youth and recent graduates should inform educators and policymakers. This is especially important in identifying how and in what ways students fall off track, the practices that support student engagement and persistence, and the strengths and gaps in preparation for post-secondary success.

4. Study coordination with out-of-school issues and opportunities: This report has discussed the connections between disengagement and disconnection and a host of other factors outside of school, but the research presented here only begins to explore these issues. One could conduct entire research studies around the interaction effects among high school disengagement and disconnection for students involved with, for example, the juvenile justice system, foster care, homelessness or public housing. Understanding the out-of-school lives of students can provide meaningful context for the disengagement experienced in school and can inform comprehensive and coherent interventions and solutions for these youth. Understanding how some disengaged and disconnected youth participate in afterschool, community or work programs could also be a source for a transfer of knowledge across fields toward solutions.

5. Evaluate funding for disengaged and disconnected youth: Across Connecticut, students enroll in schools with significantly different levels of funding to support their education. Meanwhile, funding sources that could help to serve these students (e.g., funds governed by workforce investment boards) are often fragmented from one another rather than organized into aligned strategies. Research is needed to understand the flow of funds available to serve disengaged youth and how these funds are managed, and to explore equity issues across communities.

Conclusion

In attempting to answer the question posed above, *what would it take to help disengaged and disconnected youth in Connecticut graduate from high school ready for the future?*, our research uncovers some sobering truths: more than one out of five youth in Connecticut are either disengaged or disconnected, and face an evolving economy that largely leaves these young people out of any growth in wages and employment. On the other hand, our findings also offer hope: in the identifiable points of intervention that can put students on a path to graduation, in the research and experience that reveal leading practices, and in the potential for broad coalitions to establish stronger conditions for these youth to succeed.

Our hope is that this report begins a statewide conversation on how to improve educational and life outcomes for young people. To move this discussion forward toward action, the state will need the voices, thoughts, ideas and innovations of the entire community, as well as others from outside Connecticut. Working together, this broad coalition has the opportunity to dramatically improve the lives of disengaged and disconnected youth, help realize their untapped potential and, in turn, transform the prospects for prosperity and equity across the state.

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