Pathways Initiative

NC COUNTIES GUIDING OUR NEXT GENERATION TO BRIGHTER FUTURES

North Carolina Association of County Commissioners

Pathways Initiative Task Force Report

Published June 2020

Vision

Equipping counties to lead local youth toward a
meaningful and sustainable future.

Mission

The NCACC Pathways Task Force seeks to identify strategies
for counties to help youth chart pathways to leading productive,
healthy and happy lives in adulthood. The goal is to reduce the
rate of North Carolina's disconnected youth – those not in school
or working – by asking counties to commit to analyzing the issue
at a local level and undertaking programs and initiatives that
address the local need. The Task Force will produce a report to
equip counties with resources and tools to reach their local youth
through education and employment opportunities.

Foreword

Last August, I launched my presidential initiative, Pathways, NC Counties Guiding Our Next Generation to Brighter Futures to promote youth engagement and help disconnected youth – young people ages 16-19 – find a path toward meaningful work or higher education. At the time, I never would have imagined that just seven months later, North Carolina counties would be grappling with a global pandemic, historic rates of unemployment, and untold economic losses.

Counties are facing unprecedented challenges in response to COVID-19, and related revenue losses and unemployment will continue to linger even as the virus case counts go down. For so many counties, COVID-19 exacerbates vulnerabilities that existed before the pandemic, especially for those who were already struggling to make ends meet and those disconnected from the community.

According to a survey by the Federal Reserve, unemployment related to COVID-19 is hitting lower income earners the hardest. The survey found that 36 million Americans filed for unemployment during March and April, and 39 percent of households making $40,000 are affected by job loss. The Federal Reserve data suggests that disconnected youth, who lack the mobility and skills to secure employment in a quickly evolving job market, will face an even steeper climb in the post-COVID economy.

County Health Rankings reported in 2019 that North Carolina's average rate of disconnected youth was 9.65%, based on data collected between 2013 and 2017. Given the far reaching economic and social disruptions caused by COVID-19, youth disconnection is likely to grow. Now, more than ever, disconnected youth need a path forward.

This Pathways Task Force report outlines successful county-led efforts and factors that influence youth engagement. The report captures the work the Task Force conducted over the last several months to gain insight from subject matter experts and community stakeholders. It also includes a step by step action plan counties can use to promote youth engagement at the county, state, and federal levels.

I am grateful for all the work by the Pathways Task Force, and especially Co-Chairs, Karen Howard, Chatham County Commissioner and Mike LaBrose, Vice Chair of the Caldwell County Board of Commissioners. I also want to thank Laurel Edwards, NCACC Manager of Strategic Initiatives, who facilitated the Task Force's discovery process and made our report possible.

While the Pathways report was written before COVID-19 emerged, the findings remain relevant and are increasingly important today. Engaging our youth will help pave the way toward North Carolina's recovery while also ensuring we have an equipped workforce to reach our economic potential well into the future. I urge you to carefully review the NCACC Pathways Initiative Task Force Report and consider ways to incorporate the recommended action plan into your county's activities.

Sincerely,

Kevin Austin

NCACC President 2019-20

Yadkin County Board Chair

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Executive Summary

Youth disconnection, defined as those ages 16-19 who are neither in school nor working, affects the social and economic fabric of the entire community[1]. When youth become disconnected by withdrawing from school or work, it disrupts their social and professional development. And, if they remain out of the workforce very long, they may never be able to recover their lost earning potential as adults. North Carolina's disconnected youth population is estimated to be 9.65%. From an economic perspective, North Carolina businesses often cite lack of qualified candidates as a major business concern. To reach our full economic potential, our youth need the right skills to thrive in a modern, evolving economy. Youth disconnection also leads to increased costs for counties in lost revenue and increased spending on social services and public safety. According to a recent report by Opportunity Nation - a coalition of non-profits focused on closing the opportunity gap in the U.S. - young adults who are not in school or working cost taxpayers $93 billion annually and $1.6 trillion over their lifetimes in lost revenues and increased social services.

NCACC President and Chair of the Yadkin County Board of Commissioners Kevin Austin committed his presidential year to addressing the issue of youth disconnection. President Austin appointed the Pathways Task Force, co-chaired by Chatham County Commissioner Karen Howard and Caldwell County Commissioner Mike LaBrose and comprised of 17 commissioners from across the state. The task force's focus was on gathering information and discussing successful programs that engage youth to help guide them on a path to career success. The task force met three times from November through February and this report highlights their work over the course of those months.

The NCACC Pathways Initiative seeks to reduce the rate of disconnected youth while closing the skills gap throughout North Carolina. Focusing on disconnected youth will help communities attract and retain local, homegrown talent. The initiative explores specific ways to help youth prepare for the modern workforce, including options for experiential learning, technical training, certification, and higher education in conjunction with the community college system. President Austin has coordinated the effort with myFutureNC, a statewide organization striving to enable 2 million North Carolinians to attain post-secondary degrees or certifications by 2030.

During task force meetings, the group sought to better understand the issue of disconnected youth and to begin to determine how counties can pull different levers to affect change. The task force worked closely with experts to identify several successful county-led efforts and factors that influence youth engagement. These findings are captured in the following report, which is designed to help counties reduce the rate of disconnected youth and raise awareness about the positive role counties can play in engaging youth. The report also includes examples of programs throughout the state that have shown promise in keeping youth engaged in their journey from education to career.

The intent is that counties will use this report as a starting point in identifying what they can do to help more youth find a pathway towards success.

The task force welcomed the opportunity to dive into an issue that is important for all counties across the state. In doing this work, the task force has been acutely aware that this issue is one that must be addressed in partnership with community leaders and in collaboration with the many stakeholders who are already doing great work in the community. The task force is committed to complementing that ongoing work and to collaborating with key leaders throughout this process. The task force wants this report to serve as a supporting document to augment existing efforts and to reiterate the progress and dedication of those who serve our youth.

Key Messages and Call to Action

The task force is committed to acting on the recommendations in this report and calls on county commissioners from across the state to spring into action. Ensuring youth have access to pathways to build productive and meaningful lives has a lasting impact on the long-term well-being of our state and is an issue that cannot wait to be addressed. These recommendations are made with the hope that each county can put together an action plan and make a commitment to prioritize efforts that engage youth. It is up to each county to determine what levers to pull that make sense for their community. There are also a few recommendations that could have an impact on all counties and will require broad support.

State and Federal Level Actions

The North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC) supports efforts to strengthen county involvement to develop effective youth workforce strategies at the state and federal levels.

Prioritize County Involvement: As the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is up for reauthorization, the NCACC recommends advocating for more involvement and coordination with local government as Congress considers reauthorization legislation. Currently, most WIOA funds are distributed through local workforce development boards. The Association would encourage including more opportunities for counties to access these funds or to make their involvement in workforce development plans a key component to funding.

Additionally, the North Carolina state action plan for WIOA funds distribution gathers local input through the local workforce development boards. NCACC encourages more collaboration between these local boards and county commissioners to strengthen programming focus and impact.

At the state level, there are many programs focused on youth workforce development strategies, including a focus on disconnected youth, that are run through local workforce development boards. NCACC supports more involvement of counties in how these funds are distributed.
See Appendix A for action plan

Counties should advocate for legislative changes as part of the NCACC legislative goals process. The NCACC membership decides the legislative priorities for NCACC and these priorities become the legislative goals for NCACC each biennium. Members can engage in this process by submitting goals that strengthen county involvement in state funds for programs that target youth. They can also create goals that would allow for more and flexible funding to counties to implement programs that target youth.
See Appendix A for action plan

County Level Actions

Establish a Baseline: Before a county can make meaningful progress on lowering the number of disconnected youth, there must first be a baseline for data, against which progress can be measured. This will require an environmental scan of what contributes to disconnection in a community and what programs are offered, missing, or inadequate. This information, to be gathered using available data from key stakeholders, should be measured against national standards and best practices so that counties can create an action plan that has measurable goals.

See Appendix A for action plan and Appendix B for meeting checklist

Collaborate with Key Stakeholders: County commissioners can play a key role in bringing people together to discuss issues and contemplate solutions. Commissioners are encouraged to meet regularly with leaders from the school system, workforce development community, and local business to increase collaborations and partnerships to serve communities. Counties are encouraged to pass a resolution to hold a convening that brings together stakeholders to address this issue and designate a county commissioner to act as a convener and facilitator of this group.

See Appendix A for action plan and Appendix D for sample resolution

Promote Promising Programs: County commissioners should help promote promising initiatives and programs that are serving their community. Counties showing support for programs helps expand and increase their impact and raises awareness of the services offered.

See Appendix A for action plan

Pursue Innovative Funding and Approaches: Counties as entities have opportunities to pursue funding, both state and federal, as well as private, to expand services in their counties. County commissioners should be open to innovative funding and approaches to programming that help expand services.

See Appendix A for action plan

Methodology

The county commissioners appointed to the task force committed to having conversations with key community stakeholders to determine how different counties are addressing youth disconnection. They identified programs and initiatives and submitted them for review and discussion. When the task force met, they heard from subject matter experts and people responsible for program delivery.

The first task force meeting focused on data gathering. Commissioners heard from Paige Worsham, NCACC Associate General Counsel, who presented in-depth data on disconnected youth in North Carolina and how the numbers can be interpreted. They also heard from Rebecca Tippett, Ph.D., who serves as Director for Carolina Demography of UNC-Chapel Hill's Carolina Population Center. She presented on the "leaky pipeline" of education in North Carolina, explaining

how individuals leak out of the pipeline to post-secondary education or training at various transition points along the way. She stressed the importance of understanding key transition points and the opportunities for systems and communities to engage and improve overall outcomes.

The first meeting concluded with a panel of speakers from different sectors who are concerned with youth disconnection and the impact on their work—the speakers for this panel were Surry Community College President David Shockley, Vance County Schools Superintendent Anthony Jackson and Inmar Chief Executive Officer David Mounts.

In between meetings, task force members identified programs in their communities and elsewhere across the state that were working to engage youth. They also set up trilateral meetings with the superintendent of schools and community college presidents to build or strengthen those relationships and create opportunities for collaboration.

The second meeting of the task force allowed members to hear from students in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County school system. The students shared their thoughts on the support they have found helpful as they navigate their high school experience. They also offered insight into how commissioners and schools can be supportive to students as they contemplate their futures.

In addition, the task force heard about two innovative programs in the state—K-64 in Catawba County led by Founder and Executive Director Mark Story, and Robert and Janice McNair Educational Foundation, led by Executive Director Monica Lee. The two directors shared information about their programs and how they could be replicated across the state. Mr. Story died just weeks after the task force heard his compelling report. K-64 shares on its website, "Mark Story was the passionate visionary behind K-64 who brought all the stakeholders to the table to open doors for students to achieve their educational and career goals. We tragically lost him in February 2020 but are committed to carry his vision forward with the same passion with which he paved the way." Catawba Valley Community College President Dr. Garrett Hinshaw currently serves as K-64's Interim Chief Executive Officer.

The task force then took all of the information they collected over the past several months and came up with several overarching themes. These themes have been outlined in this report and are the basis for the recommendations.

This is a Complex Issue, Solutions Must Be Locally Driven

Addressing youth disconnection is a complex issue that will not be solved in a silo. There are underlying issues that drive the rate of disconnection, including intergenerational poverty, race, mental health, social stability, and many others. The task force recognizes that to holistically address the issue of disconnection, these larger issues must be taken into consideration when identifying solutions. The task force hopes that the broad principles and programs included in this report are a starting point for communities to take and then tailor to address their specific community, taking into consideration the unique challenges that exist within their communities. The task force recognizes the importance of identifying solutions that are relevant and specific to each community.

Recommended Approaches

There is no magic answer to ensuring that all youth remain engaged in their education and find meaningful work. The one thing that is universal is that progress can only be achieved through collaboration and coordination. Through this work, the task force has learned about innovative programs that have proven to move the ball forward. There are proven strategies that can improve the chances that youth stay connected and help reduce the rate of disconnection. The task force has outlined those strategies and included some examples of programs that are being deployed throughout the state. The task force identified programs in counties of varying sizes and demographics and believes that these highlight just some examples of what can work.

See Appendix C for contact information for highlighted programs and approaches

I. Access to Support and Connectors

Research affirms that when students have adult support, they experience increases in academic achievement, social competence, and civic engagement, regardless of race or family income. Yet, one in three young people reach the age of 19 without having a mentoring relationship of any kind. An at-risk student who has access to a positive mentoring relationship, formal or informal, is more likely to enroll in and graduate from college, hold a school leadership position, and regularly volunteer in their community, compared to those without a mentor[2]. Adult support, in the form of mentors, guidance counselors, social workers and psychologists and positive adult presence can help youth navigate their education journey and provide guidance as they determine their path into the workforce. It is recommended that youth have access to adult support early, often, and consistently. These adults can provide crucial counsel if youth encounter difficulties along their journey and can help connect them to resources to ensure they stay on the path to continue their education and explore opportunities for meaningful work.

A main benefit of adult support is their ability to make connections for youth that they otherwise may not seek out for themselves. Guidance counselors, college and career advisers, social workers and psychologists play a crucial role in helping students visualize what their post-secondary paths can look like. They can connect youth to opportunities that expose them to potential careers, guide them through the postsecondary application process, and help them understand how to maximize their high school journey to ensure they can access the pathway they would like to pursue after graduation.

Highlighted Programs and Recommended Strategies:

- **Robert and Janice McNair Educational Foundation (Rutherford County):** Rutherford County implemented a mentor program in all of their public middle and high schools. Rutherford County is a rural county of roughly 66,000 residents and has one of the highest disconnected youth rates in the state, at 15 percent. McNair Foundation works in collaboration with Rutherford County Schools to provide programs and activities that are designed to raise awareness, expand knowledge and prepare students for a postsecondary education in their desired career. Their mentor program is embedded into the Rutherford County School system and provides a mentor to every student who attends one of the three traditional middle schools and three high schools in the

county, serving about 3,500 students. Volunteer mentors interact with about 15-18 students and commit to 1 ½ to 3 hours a month. Rutherford County schools have one of the lowest drop-out rates in history at four percent and the graduation rate is 80 percent. Eighty-six percent of Rutherford seniors meet the UNC System admissions requirements and Rutherford's graduates are above the national average for college enrollment for low income, rural schools. Fiscally, the mentor program is a fairly inexpensive program to operate. Funding would be needed to cover one non-certified staff member (approximately $50,000) and training, basic supplies and materials, and appreciation events ($10,000 – $15,000) for the program. This program is privately funded in Rutherford County.

- **North Carolina State University College Advising Corps**: NC State University College Advising Corps (NC State CAC) launched in 2014-2015 as the result of a generous gift from the John M. Belk Endowment, which aimed to expand the College Advising Corps in North Carolina. The inaugural cohort of advisers consisted of nine recent NC State graduates serving in nine rural high schools across North Carolina. Now in its sixth year, the NC State CAC has 21 advisers serving in 21 high schools across 11 counties. The College Advisers are placed in high need schools and assist low-income, first-generation college, and underrepresented students from rural North Carolina to help them navigate the process of finding colleges that are the best academic, financial, and personal fit for them.

- **Career Advisers in High Schools:** Many counties have placed career advisers in the public high schools to help students understand their options for gaining meaningful work after graduation. These advisers can help augment guidance counseling services and have an unique understanding of different career paths and available training programs that are outside of the traditional college pathway.

- **Expanded resources for guidance counselors, social workers, psychologists:** All students meet with their guidance counselors in some capacity over the course of their time in high school. Guidance counselors can help students determine the best pathway for the future and can connect students to resources to achieve their goals. It is important to ensure there are enough guidance counselors to meet our students' needs and that the guidance counselors have the training and resources available to connect students to the pathway that is in their best interest.

II. Access to Information and Experiences

There has been a long-standing acceptance that the best path to education and career success is to graduate high school, enroll in college and complete a four-year degree. However, the barriers of entry into this model have increased. The narrative around how to achieve success post high-school is starting to and should continue to shift. Some of the most prominent research comes from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) and the Lumina Foundation. CEW predicts that within two years, 67 percent of jobs in North Carolina will require education and training beyond high school, while Lumina estimates that 60 percent of people in the state will require postsecondary education, which includes high-quality credentials and/or degrees, to secure employment. Many of these jobs will be in the manufacturing and STEM sectors, often requiring technical skills and trades training.

The task force recognized the importance of educating youth about the many possibilities that exist outside of the traditional narrative. It is important to intentionally and deliberately bring forth opportunities for youth to explore that allows them to fully understand the possibilities for their futures. Youth may not know where to access this information or how to pursue opportunities that sound interesting to them. Leaders need to bring the information to the students and reinforce them through opportunities and experiences including access to onsite tours, apprenticeships, career fairs, and professionals who can tell students how to pursue a career in their field. Even more effective is when students can learn skills onsite at their learning institution as that removes barriers of entry for those who may not be able to pursue training opportunities once they leave the school campus, which also helps address the aforementioned transportation issue.

Highlighted Programs and Recommended Strategies:

- **Dream It. Do It:** Dream It. Do It. is an initiative led by the Piedmont Triad Workforce Development Board and is available across a seven county area which includes Caswell, Davie, Forsyth, Rockingham, Stokes, Surry, and Yadkin. It works to change the perception of the manufacturing industry and inspire next-generation workers to pursue manufacturing careers. The initiative offers local manufacturers, schools, community-based organizations and other stakeholders the opportunity to partner with a respected national platform to promote manufacturing as a top tier career choice in the United States. Dream It. Do It. promotes manufacturing to three distinct target audiences: students, parents and educators. Dream It. Do It. has been implemented by the Piedmont Triad Regional Workforce Development Board in North Carolina. Their most successful program, Manufacturing Day, served 1,000 participants in 2018 at more than 25 employer sites, giving young people an opportunity to understand the available careers in manufacturing.

- **K-64 (Catawba County):** K-64 is a partnership between government, businesses and the community and aims to increase student and employer engagement in educational programs to help more students realize a path into meaningful careers. K-64 is a new approach to talent development designed to positively position communities in a competitive market. The initiative was chartered as part of the Catawba County Commissioners' Strategic Plan to proactively drive the local economic and population growth in Catawba County in response to a decline in the working-age population and the lack of a skills-ready workforce. It connects students and employers throughout educational curriculum to help shape future careers and meet workforce demands. The initiative provides every student with a computer device, character education for students, and collaboration with community-based employers. It started in 2016 and is governed by a Board of Directors and has full-time staff to oversee and implement the strategic plan. The initiative leverages tax dollars, private contributions and grant funds to support program expansion and sustainability. The Catawba County Board of Commissioners provided seed funding and continues to financially support the program. Since its inception, K-64 has raised more than $6 million, placed 16,000 devices in the hands of K-12 students, invested more than $300,000 in teacher training, and driven overall enrollment at Catawba Valley Community College to a three percent increase.

- **Strategic Twin-Counties Education Partnership (Edgecombe and Nash Counties):** STEP's mission is to improve educational opportunities for pre-K to post-secondary students in Edgecombe and Nash Counties by facilitating collaboration by all groups involved and interested in public education. Their goal is to ensure that young people in Edgecombe and Nash Counties are exposed to and fully prepared for the 21st century jobs that the region offers. One of their popular programs is "Lunch with an Engineer," where engineers from local companies meet with students at their schools during lunch to talk about their jobs and how interested students can gain the certification and education needed to pursue a career in this field.

- **Early College at High School:** North Carolina's early college high schools have been among the state's most successful schools, with high graduation rates and school test scores. Early colleges are small public high schools that offer students a chance to graduate with a diploma and tuition-free college credit. The schools are a partnership between school districts and local colleges, often community colleges. Each graduating class of North Carolina early college students could bring an estimated $92 million in increased lifetime benefits to society, such as through increased tax payments and reduced incarceration costs, according to Julie Edmunds, Program Director for Secondary School Reform for the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro[3].

- **Senate Bill 391:** In 2019, the legislature passed and the Governor signed into law a bill that allows 16 and 17 year olds who are enrolled in school to participate in apprenticeships or internships that had previously been inaccessible due to their designation as "detrimental to the health and well-being of the youth" by the Commissioner of Labor. Under proper supervision at the worksite and permission and coordination through the school, youth now have more opportunities to explore careers in the technical sectors. Employers and school systems can now implement the Student Internship Written Agreement through the Department of Labor to take advantage of this program. Surry County is among the first counties to implement this and has two students participating under this new program.

III. Access to Diversity of Programming

Today's youth face a variety of challenges that can disrupt their education journeys and put them at risk for failing to complete their secondary schooling or pursuing meaningful post-secondary opportunities. Community leaders should look for ways to keep youth engaged in their education when the traditional on-campus experience is not a viable option. There are many alternative options for students to continue their high school education that are outside of the traditional school day. The task force encourages communities to look at some successful models and determine how they might implement similar programs to help reduce the dropout rate and better support their students.

Highlighted Programs and Recommended Strategies:

- **F.A.C.E (Forsyth County):** The Forsyth Academy of Continuing Education is an evening high school opportunity for students who may otherwise not be able to access or continue a traditional secondary school environment. This program allows for students to take classes in the evening at the career center and is a more individualized and focused program to help students earn their diploma.

- **Early college/dual enrollment opportunities:** Many counties offer early college or dual enrollment programs that help students pursue both a high school diploma and a two year college degree. Creative scheduling for the high school courses helps ensure that they are receiving the basic academic work required for diploma attainment while also pursuing a higher education credential. These students often spend minimal time in the traditional school campus and become more familiar with the structure of a college campus at a younger age.

- **Online high school and other high school equivalent programs:** Some counties have experimented with offering high school classes online for students who may face barriers to succeeding in a traditional high school program. These programs allow for students to continue their education in a space that is more conducive to individual learning styles and can eliminate some of the environmental factors that contribute to a student discontinuing their education.

IV. Access to Funding

Funding will always be a challenge for counties and other institutions as they have to make decisions on where to spend limited resources. There are many resources outside of county dollars that can be harnessed to help implement innovative programs for youth. One challenge with these other dollars are the barriers and restrictions that are tied to them. Communities benefit from maximum flexibility with resources so that they can use dollars to best address the issues in their community in a very intentional way. Being able to be flexible with these funds will allow them to access maximum dollars and implement programs with fewer restrictions. When state, federal or private funding is being contemplated, local voices should be included in determining what the requirements for these dollars are so that counties can access the money with minimum restriction. This allows counties to better respond to their community needs.

Highlighted Programs and Recommended Strategies:

- **WIOA:** On July 22, 2014, Congress passed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which is the primary authority for federal workforce programs. WIOA is the first legislative reform of the public workforce system in 15 years and places a greater emphasis on the disconnected youth population. WIOA required each state to submit a four-year strategy for its workforce development system. According to North Carolina's plan, Local Youth Committees are responsible for developing portions of the local plan related to eligible youth and making recommendations to the local workforce board regarding youth service providers. As part of their local plan, each local area will develop written criteria to identify effective youth activities and providers. In North Carolina, 23 local boards, many of which are housed within regional councils of governments (COGs), are responsible for developing local plans for the use of WIOA funds; oversight of the local service delivery system; and coordinating activities with economic development entities and employers in their local areas.

- **Finish Line Grants:** On July 12, 2018, Governor Roy Cooper announced the Finish Line Grants program to help community college students complete their training when facing unforeseen challenges. Grants were available for the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 school years. Partnerships – each involving a community college and a workforce

development board – collaborate to apply for funding and establish a joint process for reviewing funding requests from students who have completed 50 percent of their degree or credential (including their current enrollment).

- **Collaboration with Workforce Development Boards:** Workforce development boards often are the entities that can apply for and distribute innovative funds made available through state and federal initiatives. Counties and workforce developments boards can collaborate to ensure that applications for funding are developed to address youth disconnection and that any funds the workforce boards control can be disbursed with maximum flexibility. Many workforce development boards have funds for at-risk youth programs and can be leveraged to help disconnected youth.

- **Local Partnerships with Businesses:** The business community needs a skilled workforce to meet their goals and are important stakeholders in every county. Local businesses can sponsor training programs, offset costs for students to earn certifications and can bring other innovative approaches to the table to help develop the talent pipeline.

- **Pursue Innovative Funding:** Counties often face difficult decisions around funding and must balance their budget against the many priorities that are presented to them. More often than not, counties cannot fund all of the programs presented to them. In these cases, there is always opportunity for counties to look to innovative funding for programs that cannot be funded through the county. Counties can leverage relationships with local community foundations, grant making organizations, community action agencies and other funding groups to help implement or expand programs that are serving youth to ensure they stay connected and are being trained to join the workforce. State and national organizations like United Way, United Fund and Community Service Block Grants are great opportunities for counties to pursue to determine if there are ways to partner to expand services to youth.

Partnerships are Paramount

County commissioners are uniquely aware of the importance of partnerships when addressing community needs. This is all the more important when addressing the issue of disconnected youth. Youth need adult leaders to work collaboratively with local government, school systems, community organizations, and the business community to be the most effective in ensuring they have access to pathways from education into higher education and meaningful careers. Each sector brings a unique ability to help the youth and when they are all rowing in the same direction, transformational pipelines of information and opportunity can emerge. Through this work, the task force wants to highlight the importance of partnership, open dialogue and collaboration with those in the community who can bring something to the table to help our youth.

See Appendix B for key stakeholders meeting checklist

School system leaders: Community College Presidents, School Superintendents, School Board members: Counties and school systems are intimately connected and can benefit from coming together on a regular basis to connect on issues facing the community and how they can work together. Rowan County has seen transformational change by sitting down

together regularly and have named their initiative the Rowan Educational Collaborative, which aims to create an agile talent framework that promotes prosperity for businesses and residents. Their collaborative also includes the Economic Development Commission President. In counties where there are other higher education institutions like private colleges, those leaders should be included in these strategic meetings.

Local business leaders: The school system is a talent pipeline for the workforce and the workforce is crucial to creating a thriving community. Business leaders need to be engaged to ensure that everyone is working together, workforce needs are met, and that employers are able to recruit and maintain local talent and are incentivized to continue to invest in the community. This takes collaboration from all parties and creating strong links between business leaders and the talent pipeline in schools, especially high school and community colleges. Local businesses can get involved early on in the education process by seeking out opportunities to highlight their work and the available opportunities to students as they begin to think about their futures.

Counties can strengthen their relationship with the business community through their local chambers of commerce and should take steps to establish and grow these relationships. Multilateral relationships can bring meaningful programs and impact to a community.

Davie County has initiated the Ignite Davie program, a college promise program formed out of a partnership between Davie County, Davie County Economic Development, Davie County Chamber of Commerce and the Davie Community Foundation. This program provides college access through tuition assistance for high school graduates.

Pioneers and straight talkers: Every community has business leaders who are invested in their communities. These leaders are an important part of transformational change as they have ideas and resources, and are able to take risks that are outside the scope of local government. Harnessing the power of the business community and finding leaders who are willing to approach this issue in collaboration with other community leaders can bring innovation and transformation. It is also important to find partners in the community who can break down communication barriers and can spark frank and open dialogue in service of creating change. County commissioners and school leaders may not always be in the position to facilitate these types of discussions, but there is a leader in every community who has those skillsets and is a trusted member of the community who can create space for effective communication and collaboration. These conversations should be facilitated in a safe and trusted environment and their impact can allow for accelerated change.

Justice and Public Safety: Youth who are involved in the criminal justice system or have regular interactions with justice and public safety officials are disproportionately more likely to end up disconnected. Officials working in the justice and public safety system, including school resource officers, sheriffs and their staff, and county jail personnel, likely have a unique insight into the youth they interact with, the challenges they face, and the resources they could use that would help minimize the youth's contact with these officials. Counties should tap into this knowledge resource and should involve them as programs are being discussed so that they can provide a different perspective on the impact programs can have on higher risk youth.

Acknowledging External Factors / Policy Changes

As previously stated, addressing the issue of disconnected youth is a complex and multifaceted issue that cannot be solved in isolation. It is important to note that there are many factors in a community that affect the ability to serve youth and prevent them from being disconnected.

Some of the external factors that need to be considered include:

Integrating Human Services Sooner: There is undoubtedly a correlation between socio-economic challenges and youth disconnection. Many complex factors that vary from family to family contribute to issue. A challenge that remains is how to ensure that all residents have access to and are receiving human services as soon as they can. Schools can be the most stable environment for resource delivery for many students. Determining the best way to address this should be part of the conversation between community leaders in determining how to create and maintain a thriving place to live.

Serving Justice Involved Individuals: A youth who becomes involved in the justice system is disproportionately more likely to become disconnected and less likely to pursue meaningful education and post-secondary opportunities after their involvement in the justice system. There are programs that exist in each county through the Juvenile Crime Prevention Councils that aim to make the best decision for youth who are involved in the justice system. There still remains an opportunity for programming to help connect adjudicated youth to skills and education to help them transition back into their communities after their time served. Communities in Schools has piloted the Reentry to Resiliency program that helps students in four counties transition back into the community after their time served in a Youth Development Center. Programs that connect with youth upon release and follow them as they transition can help reduce the rate of recidivism, increase the chances for these youth to continue their education, and pursue meaningful work.

De-stigmatizing Community College / Early College Programming / Alternative School Options: As previously mentioned, there has long been a widely accepted education path that leads to success—one that goes from secondary school straight into a four-year college or university resulting in an "on time" four-year completion with an undergraduate degree. This singular pathway should no longer be considered the primary pathway to success. North Carolina has a robust community college system and the current economy favors high-skill and technical skilled workers for growing sectors. Currently, employers are facing a shortage of qualified workers for these high paying in demand jobs. As community leaders, we need to shift the narrative around successful post-secondary opportunities. Within our school system, we need to reframe community college and technical skills so that they are not seen as a backup option but rather a viable primary path into a high quality post-secondary credential and career. The same reframing needs to be applied to those programs that offer alternative paths towards post-secondary attainment, particularly early college and nontraditional secondary attainment. Today's youth thrive when they are given a variety of options for how to pursue education attainment in an environment that is right for them. As communities that encourage youth to stay in school and pursue postsecondary opportunities, county leaders should support whatever path will help them realize their potential.

Making this a County Issue: County leaders are the locally elected officials closest to the people and as leaders, should proactively pursue solutions that will help our current and future generations thrive within counties. The importance of prioritizing youth — the future workforce — cannot be overstated. County commissioners can bring heightened awareness to these issues, influence positive change, and look for opportunities to expand resources for youth to ensure their needs are met and they have the support to realize their full potential. The task force encourages all boards of commissioners to commit to making this issue a county priority and pursue ways they can use their influence to effect change for youth.

School Calendar Alignment: As counties contemplate changes they can make in their communities to help youth access the full set of resources available, a continued challenge will be the disconnect between school calendars—particularly between K-12 and the college system. High school students face barriers to entry in the community college system because their calendar does not align with the community college calendar. This can interrupt a student's education journey if they cannot make a seamless and timely transition from high school into college. This potentially leaves a gap where students can fall off track of their plans. By aligning the calendars, more high school students could more easily transition into higher education opportunities, increasing the likelihood that they will achieve postsecondary attainment.

Additional Resources

This report references a sampling of the great programs being implemented across the state. The task force learned about many other programs and knows that there are even more that are positively impacting communities. To learn more about additional programs across the state that are engaging our youth, you can reference a catalog of resources for a broader list of programming.

Next Steps

To create lasting change in our counties, this is not a one-time project or initiative. Serving our youth is going to need continued investment and attention and will need to be monitored, revised, and championed. This issue needs a champion on the board of commissioners and the task force recommends that counties commit to making this a continuing priority on their agenda. Disconnected youth should also be considered opportunity youth as they are the future of our state and by investing in them, we are investing in the betterment of our state for years to come.

County commissioners are tasked with serving their communities at the local level and one of the most important ways to do that is to ensure that youth are able to realize their full potential. This task force is committed to finding best practices and strategies for ensuring youth can pursue a pathway to bright and successful futures while trying to reduce the number of youth who become disconnected. There were many programs and strategies that were identified as ways to address this issue and the task force commends all work being done at the local level across the state to help best serve youth.

NCACC President Austin and the task force hope this report can be used to begin discussions, partnerships, and program building so that every county across the state develops a robust plan to engage youth and to create access for them to fully realize their potential. The North Carolina Association of County Commissioners will remain committed to helping counties determine the best way forward for this issue and will remain a resource as counties work to improve the lives of those in their communities.

Appendix A - Action Plan for Key Asks

I. State and Federal Actions

Advocate for WIOA Funds: Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds a variety of programs jointly administered by the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education in conjunction with state and local partners. WIOA was signed into law on July 22, 2014. Congress passed the Act by a wide bipartisan majority, and it is the first legislative reform of the public workforce system in 15 years. WIOA authorized a variety of programs to help out-of-school youth and work-based training programs from 2015-2020.

County commissioners should advocate at the federal level to ensure that these funds are reauthorized. They should also coordinate with their local workforce development boards to increase the county's involvements in the disbursement of these funds so that these dollars can go to impactful programs.

In February, the National Association of Counties (NACo) Community Economic and Workforce Development Steering Committee unanimously passed an amendment offered by NCACC President Austin to strengthen the county role in federal workforce development programs. The amendment, which passed as part of NACo's policy resolution on Fiscal Year 2021 Appropriations for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, states that NACo supports "strengthening the county's role in planning and administering WIOA programs. Counties should emphasize this message in discussions with the North Carolina Congressional delegation."

> **Key contact information:**
> NC Congressional Delegation
> *Note that Representative Virginia Foxx is a ranking member of the Education and Labor Committee.*

Connect with Work Force Development Boards: Counties have statutory roles in local workforce development boards and are able to influence and help direct funds and programs for each workforce region. Counties should ensure that they are in the discussions about how workforce development boards fund programs that target youth. Counties can advocate for funding to go to promising programs that are found to help ensure youth stay on track towards completing their education and entering the workforce.

> **Key Contact Information:**
> Workforce Development Boards

- Advocate for best fiscal agent to receive WIOA funds
- Nominate board members who can champion programs that help build the bridge from education to the workforce.
- Pursue opportunities for collaboration for the distribution of funds that are specifically targeting for youth programs.

Participate in NCACC Legislative Goals Process: Each biennium, the membership of the NCACC determines the advocacy agenda for the Association, who will advocate on behalf of all counties at the state and federal level. Counties can submit goals that will help the Association advocate for more county authority and funding flexibility to promote, implement, and expand programs that target youth to ensure they have a path from education to career.

> **Key contact information:**
> NCACC Legislative Goals
> NCACC Director of Government Relations, Amber Harris

- Counties can submit goals from July-September to the Association that would help advocate for priorities that increase a county's capacity to serve youth to attain quality education and workforce training.

II. County Actions

Establish a Baseline: One of the most important aspects of addressing the issue of disconnected youth is to first examine what the environment is in each county. Every county will have unique characteristics that will need to be addressed and understanding the different factors that contribute to youth disconnection is the first step to determining what programs and services are needed. When addressing a baseline, counties can use the following resources to understand the landscape in their community:

- 2019 Map Book (page 25 map on disconnected youth, along with other helpful indicators, updated annually)
- NC Community Colleges Dashboards (look at enrollment and full time enrollment for your community college, along with other indicators available)
- myFuture NC County Data and Resources Dashboard (all 100 counties will have county profiles available by June 2020)
- County Health Rankings

Collaborate with Key Stakeholders
See Appendix B for meeting checklist

- **Designate a County Commissioner Lead to act as the facilitator for this work:** To ensure that this work is given prioritization, the task force recommends appointing a commissioner to serve as lead. This commissioner can be the convener for stakeholder meetings and will regularly report back to the board the progress and actions that are being taken to address this issue.

Pursue Innovative Funding: There are a lot of funding opportunities that counties can pursue to help fund new or existing programs that serve youth. These opportunities are often going to come out of establishing strategic relationships with key stakeholders in the county. Funding opportunities will vary by county, here is a list of potential opportunities to pursue.

- Reach out to your local Chamber of Commerce
- Meet with Economic Development Lead
- Research local philanthropic groups, request strategic relationships (invite them to stakeholder meeting, as outlined in Appendix B)
- Meet with Workforce development board about current and possible funding
- Stay aware of statewide programs
    - Golden LEAF
    - Finish Line Grants

Key Actions for these conversations:
- Find out what the funding priorities are
- Ask how counties or programs can access funding opportunities
- Propose collaborations for possible funding
- Have an idea ready to pitch

Appendix B - Stakeholder Meeting Check List

Goal: to convene a gathering of stakeholders to understand the landscape of youth in the county, the needs of the business community, the current programs in place to help ensure that youth have a path from education to the workforce and identify areas for improvement.

Facilitator: Designated County Commissioner or their designee who will oversee this work and ensure that key meetings are being held, actions are being taken, reports back to the Board are on the agenda, and next steps are being taken to pursue opportunities that arise through these convenings.

Key attendees:
- School superintendent (select county LEA to obtain contact information)
- Community College President (select community college to obtain contact information)
- Workforce Development Board Chair (select local board to obtain contact information)
- Chamber of Commerce representative (select local chamber to obtain contact information)
- NC Department of Social Services Director or designee (select county for county information)
- Juvenile Justice Representative (Sheriffs Directory; Juvenile Crime Prevention Councils directory)
- Leading non-profits in community (this will vary county by county)

Key Actions:
- Invite key stakeholders to a meeting
    - Ask invitees for any other recommendations for attendees
- Set the agenda
    - Issue: Addressing Disconnected Youth in the County and Creating Pathways to Success for Youth
    - Establishing a Baseline
        - Along with the data resources available as listed in Appendix A, ask the stakeholders to bring data about youth that impacts their work.
    - Topics for Discussion:
        - Where are we losing youth?
        - What are the challenges they're facing?
        - What can we do better?
        - Who needs to be at the table to create this change?
        - What's one thing each of us can commit to doing when we leave here?
        - When will we meet next?
- Set timeline for follow-up

Appendix C - Pathways Initiative Catalog of Resources

Online Data Resources

NCACC Map Book: Updated each year, the NCACC gathers and analyzes data for various indicators across the state and publishes a map book that visualizes the data county by county.

Link to 2019 Map Book

NCCS Dashboards: The NC Community College System has developed a series of dashboards with some very interesting data that is available here. The task force encourages county leaders to take a look at the data around dual enrollment and enrollment over time. These dashboards will continue to be developed and added to.

Link to Dashboards

> *Side note: in North Carolina, 57 of the 58 community colleges have at least one cooperative innovative high school (in which all students are dually enrolled), and it appears that 54 of the 58 have at least one early college high school (one type of cooperative innovative high school). This could be a good topic of conversations with your superintendent and community college president.*

myFuture NC County Dashboard Profiles: In February 2020, myFutureNC and Carolina Demography collaborated to launch the myFutureNC Attainment Dashboard. The dashboard shows North Carolina's progress toward the state's overall 2030 goal for postsecondary educational attainment, as well as 18 educational performance indicators. They are creating individual county profiles and all 100 should be completed by June.

Link to Dashboard Overview

NC Careers: The state has a career website tool that is aimed at helping people explore career options across the state. The task force encourages county leaders to explore this tool to learn more about the state of the workforce and available careers within the state. One particular tool to note is the Occupational Profiles tool, which outlines the education requirements for various fields of work. The Career Cluster also helps identify potential careers that align with an individual's interest. There is potential to use this tool to help students better understand the path to their desired career.

Link to NC Careers

Noteworthy Data Reports: Measure of America published a national report on disconnected youth. The task force encourages county leaders to take a look at this report. There is an accompanying data dashboard that shows data from NC on disconnected youth broken out by state and then by county. NCACC coordinates with Measure of America on different data sets used in the Map Book, including the disconnected youth map.

Link to the Disconnected Youth report
Link to Measure of America Disconnected Youth data

Leading on Opportunity (website): The Leading on Opportunity Council was created in 2017 to implement recommendations from the Leading on Opportunity's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force Report, led by Dr. Ophelia Garmon-Brown and Dee O'Dell, who convened in 2015 to study economic mobility challenges in the region. This link is to the chapter of the report on College and Career Readiness and includes strategies and recommendations on how to better prepare youth for post- secondary life, including tactics and strategies aimed at reaching disconnected youth.

Information on gang activity in NC: There were some questions about the correlation between disconnected youth and gang activity/involvement. While there is not direct data that compares this directly, the most recent "GangNet" report from the Department of Public Safety does offer some interesting data about gang activity across counties in North Carolina including some age and ethnicity data. Here is a link to the report for more information.

Journal of Research on Adolescence: Reconnecting Disconnected Youth: Examining the Development of Productive Engagement

Highlighted Programs

Note the following programs have been mentioned during the data gathering work of the task force. This list is not exhaustive, but hopefully useful as programs are considered that might be beneficial for your counties. Some of these programs have had county involvement, while others are community based programs. This list will be updated regularly as conversations with more programs take place and more information is available.

Apprenticeship/Workforce Readiness Programs

Accelerate Cleveland (Cleveland County): Accelerate Cleveland is a seven-week workforce readiness program that is a public-private partnership between Cleveland County and major manufacturers in Cleveland County. As a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, Accelerate Cleveland is funded by manufacturing partners, foundations and agencies, with support from the County. Upon completion of the program, participants are not guaranteed a job, but they are given an opportunity to interview with each of the industry partners. Partnering companies are committed to interviewing program graduates.

Alamance Career Accelerator (Alamance County): This apprenticeship program allows for students to earn money on the job as soon as they start the program while also taking college classes at Alamance Community College at no cost. The program is available to eligible juniors and seniors in high school and focuses on several technical industry sectors with an emphasis on advanced manufacturing.

Capital Area Workforce Development Programs for Disconnected Youth (Wake County): Capital Area's primary focus for all programs is to provide support and services for in demand sectors/industries/occupations. Focus areas are: (1) Construction/Skill Trades (2) Healthcare and Life Sciences (3)Information Technology (4) Advanced Manufacturing.

Dream it. Do it. (Piedmont Triad Regional Council): Dream it. Do It. is an initiative that helps connect local manufacturers, schools, community colleges, community-based organizations and other stakeholders. It works to change the misperception of the industry and inspire next-generation workers to pursue careers in manufacturing. They offer an Ambassador Program, Manufacturing Day, and summer camps all aimed at exposing young people to the available careers in manufacturing and highlighting the different paths into these careers.

Guilford Apprentice Program (Guilford County): This apprenticeship program allows for students to earn money on the job as soon as they start the program while also taking college classes at Guilford Technical Community College at no cost. The program is available to eligible juniors and seniors in high school and focuses on five technical industry sectors.

JOCO Works (Johnston County): JOCO WORKS is an industry-led collaborative supported by education, business, civic, and government partners created to meet the Johnston County, North Carolina (JOCO) workforce needs of the future. The JOCO WORKS career exposition showcases available career options to the county's 8th grade students.

K-64 (Catawba County): K-64 is a partnership between government, businesses and the community and aims to increase student and employer engagement in educational programs to help more students realize a path into meaningful careers.

NextGen Youth Program (Forsyth County): Overseen by the Piedmont Triad Regional Workforce Development Board, the NextGen Youth program provides training employment services to youth ages 16-24.

Wake Works Apprenticeship Program: The Wake County Board of Commissioners approved an MOU in January 2020 for this program. The Board established a goal of increasing college affordability with the initiative being championed by Commissioner Matt Calabria. The County and Wake Tech have collaborated to increase the capacity of an apprenticeship program targeting jobs that are in high demand in the County. County and Wake Tech staff determined that county support to offer free tuition, fees and books/tools for apprenticeship programs would not only assist with affordability but address the shortage in supply of technical workers in the County. Here is a summary of the program and here is a link to the presentation that outlines the program.

Collaborative Partnerships

STEP (Edgecombe and Nash counties): This cross county partnership between Nash and Edgecombe counties and is a venue for education and business leaders to collaborate on ways to improve education outcomes and career successes by helping students understand what careers are available to them within their communities and how to pursue them. Their main focuses are on workforce awareness, workforce readiness, and strengthened communications amongst community leaders.

Wilson Forward (Wilson County): Their mission is to improve educational opportunities, health and wellness and workforce development within Wilson County. This is a collaborative effort between government agencies, business and community leaders and fosters communication and collaboration. Wilson County and the city of Wilson help fund this initiative that aims to highlight the service delivery that happens across the county to help promote quality of life in Wilson County.

Mentorship Programs

Mentor North Carolina (statewide): North Carolina is the most recent state to join the National Mentoring Partnership and Mentor North Carolina's mission is to connect the number of youth in quality mentoring relationships in North Carolina. They also provide technical assistance, coaching and other resources to agencies who have mentoring programs.

Robert and Janice McNair Educational Foundation (Rutherford County): McNair Foundation works in collaboration with Rutherford County Schools to provide programs and activities that are designed to raise awareness, expand knowledge and prepare students for a postsecondary education in their desired career. Their mentor program is embedded into the Rutherford County School system and provides a mentor to every student who attends a traditional middle and high school in the county.

Camplify (Henderson County): Camplify is a non-profit that works with the YMCA, local camps, Boys and Girls Club, and Henderson County Public Schools. The organization identifies third graders to participate in camp and camp-type experiences and students are set up with mentors through the Boys and Girls Club. Watch a video about the program here. Success measures include a 100% success rate with each participating child graduating from high school and continuing on to higher education or the military.

Post-Secondary Access Programs

Dual Enrollment Programs: Many community colleges and county high schools have programs that allow for students to enroll in community college classes while in high school at no cost to students. This has been proven to be an effective strategy to encourage continued learning and certificate attainment after high school.

Transportation partnerships (Pitt County): In Pitt County, the school system uses its buses to transport students who are enrolled in the Early College program but do not have reliable transportation to and from community college classes. This gives more students access to college classes who would otherwise be excluded because of lack of reliable transportation.

Ignite Davie (Davie County): This program is a college promise program that provides place-based last dollar scholarships to attend Davidson County Community College for residents of Davie County. The program is funded by community partners, including Davie County. Here is an FAQ document about the program and an article write up about it.

Additional Programs For Reference - *compiled from report outs at the January 24 meeting*

- Chatham County - Building Performance Workforce Development Summit: Taking place on February 4, this one-day Summit brings together private industry companies, community college staff and faculty, nonprofits, state and local government representatives, and others to share information and develop the resources that community college students need to find entry-level jobs and lasting careers in North Carolina's energy efficiency, green building and high performance construction trades.

- Mecklenburg County - Barbery in county jail for teens to learn trade so they have marketable skills when they leave. Here is an article about the program. This is the second such program in the state, the other is housed at the Harnett Correctional Institution, a state prison.

- Wilson County - Wilson Academy of Applied Technology is an early college high school that is centered-around advanced manufacturing technologies and STEM and is embedded on Beddingfield High School's campus and Wilson Community College's campus. The school is retrofitted to accommodate curriculum needs.

- Other Things to Note:
  - Henderson County: Blue Ridge Community College hosts a marketing firm on campus where community college students are learning marketing skills and developing marketing materials as part of their coursework
  - Multiple counties use their "alternative schools" to house their early college programs.

Notes and References

[1] Note: Disconnected Youth refers to young adults who are neither working nor in school. The specific age range included within the definition may differ depending on the dataset used. For example, some policy groups working with disconnected youth data in America use the age range of 16 to 24 years old. The Univ. of Wisconsin County Health Rankings, which are the data source for the 2019 NCACC County Map Book, use the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) data table "School Enrollment by Educational Attainment by Employment Status by Gender for the Population 16 to 19 Years Old." The map book uses the 16 to 19 year old age range in order to utilize the most recent publicly-available ACS dataset each year.

[2] "Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic" - A Report By Civic Enterprises and the Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University

[3] "Early college high schools are among NC's top options. Why is a funding cut possible?" - News & Observer
https://www.newsobserver.com/news/politics-government/article231561948.html