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The Administration and Congress Should Adopt a Comprehensive Approach to Youth Education, Employment and Connection

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President Obama has rightly placed a strong emphasis on the need for every American to attain education beyond high school. In his February 24 address to Congress, he said:

And so tonight, I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.

More recently, the President has highlighted the need to address fragmentation in the nation's education and training efforts, declaring:

In the weeks to come, I will also lay out a fundamental rethinking of our job training, vocational education, and community college programs. It's time to move beyond the idea that we need several different programs to address several different problems -- we need one comprehensive policy that addresses our comprehensive challenges.

As the Administration and Congress move forward in addressing these goals, we should be especially mindful of young people with the worst outcomes in education as well as training and employment. The numbers in this regard remain disturbing. Over one million students – or a fourth of all young people – still fail to complete high school each year. Another million graduate high school but do not obtain any postsecondary schooling, while many others go to college but do not obtain any degrees or certification before dropping out. And the employment experiences of most of these youth are unsuccessful as well. According to the Congressional Research Service, nearly two million youth in the noninstitutional population aged 16-24 with high school or less education are “disconnected” - i.e., not in school and not working for significant periods of time; and, if those incarcerated were included, the number of disconnected would be significantly higher.

Their lack of both schooling and early work experience will “scar” many youth permanently, guaranteeing them lower earnings over their entire lives. These youth are disproportionately minority --- African-American, Hispanic, and Native American. The disparities in education and early labor market experience exacerbate racial and ethnic inequalities in America, and are heavily associated with high rates of incarceration and poor health for some (especially minority men), further impairing their life chances. They also impose serious costs on the U.S. economy, in terms of lost output and the direct costs of dealing with crime and poor health. At the same time, employers have difficulty finding qualified workers to fill their jobs – not only those requiring college and

professional degrees, but even those requiring some postsecondary training or work experience short of a bachelor's degree (i.e., "middle-skill" jobs).

These concerns --- the need to ensure high school completion as well as some postsecondary education or training for all, to improve employment as well as educational outcomes, and to reduce fragmentation in the nation's education and training programs as we pursue these goals --- are inextricably linked. As the President recognized, no single path from high school will be right for all youth at all times, but the nation needs a comprehensive approach that maximizes opportunities for all.

Accordingly, policies that focus on postsecondary transitions and attainment must integrate efforts to reduce dropping out and promote reconnection among at-risk youth, with particular attention to the labor market as well as school. Paid work experience and work-based learning for youth can accomplish two goals: the short-term financial rewards are appealing to low-income youth and thus help attract and motivate many who are otherwise hard to serve, and the training and work experience they gain can also directly improve their earnings prospects. For in-school youth who are at risk of dropping out, opportunities for paid work experience can be integrated with a range of educational services to improve their literacy and graduation rates, and thus their chances for successful postsecondary education, as well as their workplace skills. For those out of school who have already dropped out but are not working, reconnecting them to the labor market can be part of a strategy to eventually reconnect them with secondary and postsecondary school.

A comprehensive education and employment strategy is therefore a sensible one for at-risk youth. But, at the federal level, efforts to develop such a strategy are made difficult both by the divided and fragmented responsibilities of the Departments of Education and Labor, and because of the holes and gaps in policies across important pieces of legislation - including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins), the Higher Education Act (HEA) and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).

Ultimately, both Education and Labor need to have shared and joint responsibilities; and while each of these pieces of legislation can play a distinct role, a comprehensive approach calls for clearly articulating the roles of each.

Substantively, we believe that key components of a strategy to help the most at-risk youth should include the following employment-related pieces:

- Federal funding and support to help local communities to bring together secondary and postsecondary education agencies, workforce development specialists, employers, other training providers, and various intermediaries to build comprehensive youth systems, with incentives and rewards for effective system-building;
- Stable and expanded funding for proven and promising national youth programs, and a new generation of competitive grants to foster innovative approaches, along with sustained rigorous evaluations;

- A substantially increased effort to expand paid work experience opportunities for in- and out-of school youth, through stipends for participation in Career Academies and other forms of high-quality career and technical education; private sector internships and apprenticeships; summer and year-round employment; and community service, and other public works, including “Green Economy” or “Transportation Corps” efforts.

The four major statutes mentioned above contain, or should be amended to contain, elements that add up to a strategy which reflects the key components just stated.

A separate and significantly enhanced youth title in WIA would be a central building block in funding and incentivizing the necessary substance and accompanying structural framework. But the other three statutes have critical roles to play as well, because high-quality educational content is crucial to producing the maximum payoff in the labor market. A full strategy would link relevant aspects of all four statutes.

Thus, funds in ESEA, along with the Graduation Promise Act, should be targeted to at-risk youth in school to improve literacy levels and other basic-skills competence. Perkins should be reformulated to encourage more effective and high-quality models of career and technical education, like Career Academies and apprenticeships (at postsecondary as well as secondary levels). HEA should expand services and supports for at-risk youth in community colleges. Efforts to reconnect high school dropouts to alternative schools at community colleges (as the Gateways program and others currently do) might be incorporated into either ESEA or HEA. WIA funding should complement and connect to these funding streams.

It may not be possible or even desirable to place all four statutes into simultaneous reauthorization processes. But the Executive Branch and Congress should adopt an overarching perspective to guide thinking about each statute when its reauthorization is under consideration, and might possibly amend the three others in relevant ways when WIA reauthorization occurs. The key point is that all of the challenges faced by at-risk youth must be actively addressed in our efforts to promote postsecondary education and good job outcomes for everyone. The dual goals of education and workforce preparedness must be jointly at the forefront in policy and program development, so that the appropriate role for each legislative vehicle is identified and pursued to maximum effect.