Galvanizing Collective Commitment and Action to Address Philadelphia’s Dropout Crisis

www.projectuturn.net
Project U-Turn is Philadelphia’s collective approach to resolving its dropout crisis. Launched in October 2006 after months of planning, research and analysis, Project U-Turn galvanized public opinion across a broad range of constituencies and built a solid and committed base for action. As a result, the last six years have seen:

- the creation of thousands of new seats in high-quality, “multiple pathways” educational options for Philadelphia students
- the establishment of new access points to support enrollment and re-enrollment for at-risk students
- the redirection of millions of dollars in support of off-track students and out-of-school youth

The heart of Philadelphia’s approach is committed leadership from a cross-sector group of officials representing public agencies, municipal government, the school district, community organizers, youth advocates, and area philanthropies. Since the advent of Project U-Turn, this collective impact method to recovery and prevention has produced steady declines in the high school dropout rate, and corresponding increases in the rates at which students graduate from high school, positioning Philadelphia as a national model for addressing the dropout crisis.

ABOUT PROJECT U-TURN

Project U-Turn is overseen by the Philadelphia Council for College and Career Success, a committee of the Philadelphia Works board. Philadelphia Youth Network, Inc. serves as the managing partner of Project U-Turn.
FIVE FOUNDATIONAL STRATEGIES

- Area philanthropies
- Community organizers
- Youth advocates
- Mayor’s Office
- Managing partner/backbone organization

VARIETY OF MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION AND CREDENTIAL ACHIEVEMENT OPTIONS:

- Accelerated High Schools
- E’Centers
- Educational Options Programs
- Gateway-to-College
- GED-to-College
- Job Placement
- Crisis
- Occupational Skills Training

LEVERAGED FUNDS TO SUPPORT CONVERGING AND COLLABORATIVE ENGAGEMENT:

- Initial funding by Youth Transition Funders Group
- Continuing anchor funding from William Penn Foundation (and Matt, United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey)
- Program support from United States Department of Labor, Workforce Investment Act, Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Philadelphia Department of Human Services, and the School District of Philadelphia

RESEARCH TO DRIVE PRACTICE AND ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS:

- Unfulfilled Promise (Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Social Organization of Schools and University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education, 2006)
- Turning Around - companion policy document (Project U-Turn, 2006)
- The Lifetime Employment and Earnings Consequences of Dropping Out of High School in Philadelphia: Findings from a Community-Based Sample (Research for Action, 2010)
- The Boat and Transfer Fiscal Impacts of Dropping Out of High School in Philadelphia (Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, 2008)

CULTIVATING AND EMPOWERING YOUTH VOICE:

- Youth United for Change drop-out/push-out chapters conduct research and publishes reports on attitudes and struggles of students and dropouts, and on the effectiveness of multiple pathways options
- Philadelphia Youth Network’s (PNY) Youth Ambassadors promote attention to dropout recovery through Mayoral Forum and Gubernatorial initiatives
- Students from Accelerated Schools rally in support of their schools, and join the Mayor in City Council Chambers to advocate for continued funding

2004-2005 Project U-Turn forms cross-sector collaborative to manage grant funds from national and regional philanthropies to increase educational options for struggling students and out-of-school youth.


2006 Project U-Turn, a citywide campaign to resolve Philadelphia’s dropout crisis, including divestment and increasing options for academic advancement and career placement for the City’s disconnected youth.

2007 A School District Re-Engagement Center is established to counsel former dropouts and refer them to appropriate educational programming and needed social services.

2008 In his first inaugural address, Mayor Michael A. Nutter pledges to cut the dropout rate in half within eight years.

2009 Project U-Turn becomes a standing committee of the Philadelphia Council for College and Career Success*, the new Mayor-appointed body formed to drive the City’s education goals.

2009 Project U-Turn convenes a committee of practitioners to design new out-of-school youth models, including GED-to-College and Job Placement tied to secondary and postsecondary credentials. These recommendations are subsequently adopted and American Recovery and Reinvestment Act/WIA youth funds are used to implement them.

2009 Project U-Turn convenes a committee of practitioners to design new out-of-school youth models, including GED-to-College and Job Placement tied to secondary and postsecondary credentials. These recommendations are subsequently adopted and American Recovery and Reinvestment Act/WIA youth funds are used to implement them.

2010 Project U-Turn convenes a committee of practitioners to design new out-of-school youth models, including GED-to-College and Job Placement tied to secondary and postsecondary credentials. These recommendations are subsequently adopted and American Recovery and Reinvestment Act/WIA youth funds are used to implement them.

2010 Project U-Turn helps to develop and launch the Mayor’s Graduation Coach Campaign, designed to promote high school graduation and college access and success.

2011 The Re-Engagement Center reaches the 12,000 mark for youth served since its doors opened in 2009.

2012 Project U-Turn is featured by the White House Council for Community Solutions as a national model for community action to address dropout recovery, re-engagement, and Project U-Turn.

2012 Delegations from New Zealand and Northern Ireland visit Philadelphia to learn more about its collective impact approach to solving citywide, systemic issues, including the city’s strategy for dropout prevention and re-engagement.

2012 The City of Philadelphia and Project U-Turn are recognized as a “Bright Idea” recipient by the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.
WHAT'S AHEAD FOR 2013-15

Although good progress has been made, we acknowledge that there is much more work to be done. To that end, the Project U-Turn Committee’s strategic plan for the next two years includes an ambitious set of goals across a three-part framework.

DATA

Update the seminal Unfulfilled Promise study, including a more focused analysis of the progress and needs of young people at the highest risk of dropping out, namely those who are: involved in the juvenile justice and/or foster care systems, pregnant and/or parenting, low literate, English language learners, special education students, and/or homeless.

Examine postsecondary education and employment outcomes among Philadelphia youth to identify trends in employment, earnings, industries; assess postsecondary education enrollment and persistence; estimate the determinants of successful transitions to postsecondary education and employment; and identify major transition barriers requiring program or policy intervention.

SERVICE DELIVERY

While Project U-Turn and its partners have established a number of components and supports for off-track students and out-of-school youth, several gaps continue to exist. The Project U-Turn Committee will work to strengthen the overall service delivery of the multiple pathways to graduation system by:

- Identifying the best assessment processes for disconnected youth (e.g. literacy, agency involvement, special education, behavioral health, case management, housing, dependents, job skills, college readiness) and then weave them across the Multiple Pathways to Graduation network.
- Developing a series of “on-ramps” for high-need students, particularly those with low-literacy skills, which prepare them for, and facilitate, their entry into the multiple pathways models or traditional School District high school options, as appropriate.
- Expanding the system’s capacity to track student progress, both from the Re-Engagement Center to a multiple pathways option and after graduation as they transition and move through postsecondary education, including case management and support services as needed.
- Developing a centralized strategy for the multiple pathways schools and programs to learn about postsecondary options for students, and how best to prepare them for success.
- Expanding the number and quality of Multiple Pathways to Graduation seats.
- Developing communities of practice for the multiple pathways system that address professional development, information sharing, and constituency-building needs for front-line practitioners.
- Addressing prevention through the expanded use of Early Warning Indicators and the promotion of strategies to engage students in their high school environments.

POLICY AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The Project U-Turn Committee will continue to lead efforts to:

- Protect and expand Accelerated High Schools and other multiple pathways options, working closely with School District, Mayor’s Office, and City Council to promote the importance of recovery and prevention efforts.
- Conduct a public awareness campaign focused on school attendance.
- Continue to work with Pennsylvania First Lady Susan Corbett’s staff and the Team Pennsylvania Foundation to support the Opening Doors initiative, focusing on middle school early warning indicators.
- Ensure that educational programming offered in delinquent placement facilities meets state standards and is aligned with local educational programming.
- Support the national Raise-Up Campaign, an initiative by America’s Promise Alliance to include the voices of young high school dropouts throughout the country so that schools and broader communities can develop strategies to best support them.
- Advocate for WIA reauthorization to protect and resource interventions
- Support legislation that removes barriers to youth obtaining services.
Philadelphia’s Project U-Turn is the only prominent initiative today that demonstrates the launch and implementation of a comprehensive collective impact approach for Opportunity Youth leading to measurable impact.”

FSG’s Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth, Hanleybrown, Tallant, Steinberg, Corcoran. 2012