



Helping Over-Age, Under-Credited Youth Succeed:

Making the Case for Innovative Education Strategies

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Executive Summary

Nearly 1.3 million students drop out of high school each year in the United States. This group of American youth is frequently discussed, followed, and studied, as our national education community tries to understand which students decide to drop out, and what can be done to encourage them to complete their degrees. Most commonly, students who are likely to drop out are referred to as “at-risk” or described as coming from low-income and urban communities. However, these descriptors overshadow an important distinction that marks many of these students. The phrase “over-age, under-credited” describes the *academic* background of a population of youth at the heart of our nation’s dropout crisis. The following report highlights the issues facing over-age, under-credited (OU) youth, as well as the policy measures that can improve outcomes for these young people.

The Issue

- Over-age, under-credited (OU) youth do not have the appropriate number of credits for their age and intended grade. Typically, these students have struggled and disengaged in school, many going on to become one of the estimated 6.7 million 16-24 year old high school dropouts in the United States. In Connecticut, it is estimated that 30,000 to 40,000 young people can be classified as over-age, under-credited youth.
- Students who fail to complete high school have a negative impact on the economy; each one costs their community about \$300,000 on the national average. This figure increases dramatically in many states. For instance, each high school dropout costs Connecticut more than \$500,000 over his working lifetime. These dropouts place a burden on society and the individual taxpayer, from higher rates of incarceration to increased health costs.
- The education system fails OU youth in many ways. The following issues must be addressed to improve outcomes for OU youth:
 - Students who fall behind and drop out of school display many early warning indicators such as absenteeism, poor behavior, and class failure. Statewide early warning data systems can be used to identify struggling students and rapidly intervene, but most states do not use these tools.
 - School attendance is a major indicator of student success. Schools should work to both prevent absenteeism and address the problem of truancy once it starts. Flexible options should be available for students with circumstances that make attending school on a traditional schedule difficult.

- Many students who do complete high school find themselves ill-prepared for the challenges of college. These students are forced into remedial education courses that are costly and often come without college credit, making them more likely to drop out of college. High schools must better prepare students for college.
- Alternative and adult education programs should not be used as dumping grounds where schools can escape accountability for struggling students. Instead, alternative programs should utilize innovative education strategies to reengage students and help them get back on track.

The Solution

- Educational structures, both state and nationwide, must support innovative, recuperative education strategies to assist OU youth. Students who have not succeeded in traditional school settings must be given the opportunity to achieve success in other ways. Innovative alternative education strategies that work include:
 - *Contract and Charter Schools* - These schools offer some of the best environments to foster innovation, due to flexible settings where education can be specifically geared towards the needs of particular students. Both types of schools have shown impressive results in engaging “at-risk” students across the nation.
 - *Parent Engagement* - Increasing parent involvement has been shown to be instrumental in student success. This technique is often employed in charter schools, meeting with great results.
 - *Competency-Based Learning* - This strategy allows students to progress upon mastery of a particular subject area, rather than when they complete a classroom time requirement. This method keeps students engaged by working on course material that is appropriately challenging and ensures that students fully grasp a concept before moving forward.
 - *Blended and Extended Learning* - Blended learning integrates technology and traditional classroom instruction to create a more personalized learning experience. In particular, technology-based educational programs can be a useful recuperative tool for OU youth in alternative settings. This technique is often paired with extended learning, since technology can be used away from school and at any time of the day. Extended learning provides students with additional instruction time and can be especially beneficial for low-income youth.
- States must also offer additional supports to help these initiatives succeed:

- *Adequate Funding* – While alternative programs and public schools of choice are typically the best place for struggling students to land, they are also most often grossly under-funded. These programs, which offer the innovative techniques and additional supports that OU youth need, must be equitably funded in order to provide the appropriate resources. Further, OU youth have additional needs which require more funding, much like special education or ELL students. A recuperative weight should be provided, to ensure that they receive the appropriate supports.
 - *Compulsory Attendance Age* – Many struggling students simply see a GED as an easier option than a high school diploma, and drop out. However, many students end up dropping out of GED programs as well, relegating them to the myriad of issues that face a high school dropout. States must give students a reason to, instead, transfer to an alternative program. One approach to achieve this is to ensure that students must remain enrolled in school until the age of 18.
 - *Post-Secondary Readiness* – Getting students through high school is only half of the battle; we must also prepare them for success in college and career. Schools must offer the appropriate focused preparation for post-secondary success, such as workforce development courses, which come with their own benefits for students, even while they are in high school.
 - *Early Warning Data System* – Student-level data systems allow states to track each student’s individual progress, catching them and offering appropriate supports before they fall behind. This strategy will be crucial, long-term, to eliminating the future population of OU youth.
- Calls for education reform have intensified at both the state and national level.
 - Federal reform efforts include the Investing in Innovation Fund and the National Education Technology Plan. In addition, progress has been made to stress the importance of innovation and the needs of OU youth in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.
 - In Connecticut, the legislature passed a comprehensive K-12 education reform bill, after Governor Malloy declared it “the year of education reform.” Key elements of this bill include the implementation of a new teacher evaluation system, increased support for public schools of choice, funding for additional pre-school slots, and a series of state supports and interventions for the state’s lowest performing schools and districts.

The Issue

The phrase, “over-age, under-credited” is a rare description in education that is often hidden in the shadow of better known terms to describe troubled youth like, “at-risk.” The term over-age, under-credited however, makes an important distinction that describes a population of youth at the heart of our nation’s dropout crisis. These students do not have the appropriate number of credits for their age and intended grade. For example, an over-age, under-credited (OU) youth may be enrolled in 11th grade for the second time, or be 17 years old and still registered as a high school sophomore. Often, these students have spent years struggling to succeed within a traditional high school setting, as they fall behind in credits and make little academic gains. Not surprisingly, these young people comprise a significant portion of the students who drop out of high school each year. In addition, high school dropouts themselves are, by definition, over-age and under-credited, having failed to earn the correct number of credits for their age and intended grade.

If we are to address the plight of the estimated 6.7 million American youth aged 16 to 24 that have left high school without a diploma, and are no longer enrolled in school, we must acknowledge the issues that over-age, under-credited youth face. These students require innovative techniques, supportive school policies, and quality alternative education programs to get back on track to graduate. In doing so, they will not only have a better life, but they will provide an economic boon to their communities, states, and nation.¹

Over-Age, Under-Credited Youth

The approximately 6.7 million young people in the United States who have left high school without a diploma and are no longer enrolled in school are predominantly male and minority. They represent approximately 9% of all youth in the United States. If youth that have completed some education, but are not currently enrolled in school or working are also considered, this number rises to 17% of 16-24 year olds. These disconnected young people can be divided into two groups: chronic youth (3.4 million) and under-attached youth (3.3 million). Chronic youth have not enrolled in school or secured a job after the age of 16, while under-attached youth may have completed high school or some education and work experience, but have not entered college or secured steady employment. Many of these chronic and under-attached students have been exposed to difficult life circumstances, been unsuccessful in finding work, hold a care-giver role in their family, or are involved in the criminal justice system.² Others have mental or physical health conditions that have been major obstacles to their success. Due to these circumstances, many of these students likely spent years struggling in school before dropping out or failing to pursue post-secondary education.

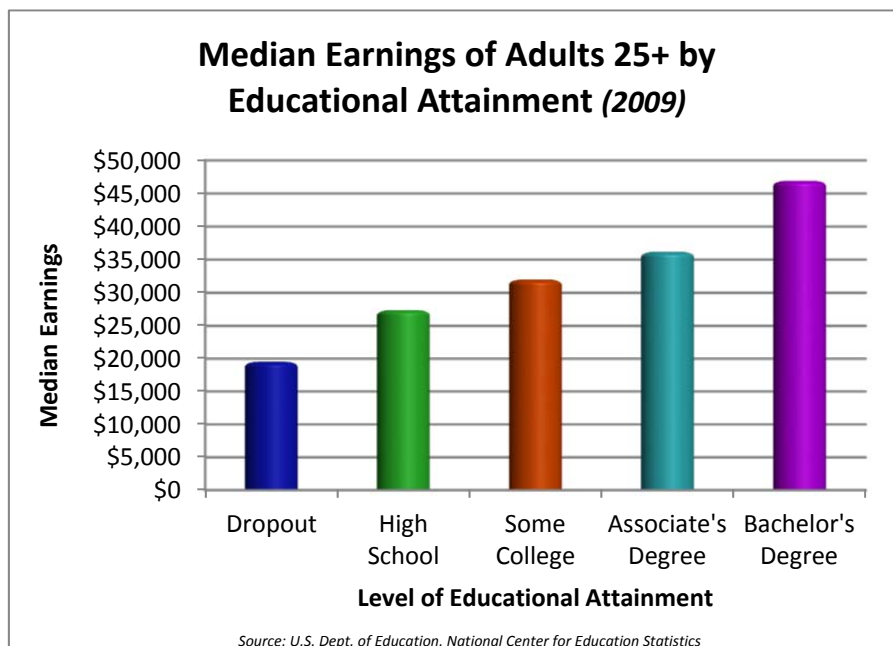
A significant portion of the off-track students and dropouts described above can be classified as OU youth. In New York City for example, a 2005 analysis found that 93% of all City dropouts

had been at least two years off track in school, relative to their age and expected credits, prior to dropping out. It also found that, citywide, only 19% of OU youth ultimately completed high school.³ In Connecticut, it is estimated that between 30,000 and 40,000 young people fall into this particular category of over-age, under-credited youth.⁴ The prevalence of this high-risk student population makes it clear that OU youth need additional attention, yet many of these students are consistently overlooked and underserved. When this happens, they often drop out of school, some joining Adult Education programs to earn a GED, and others disengaging from education entirely. This not only hurts these individuals, but negatively impacts their communities as well.

Economic and Social Impact of High School Dropouts

The economic impact of students who fail to complete high school and secure stable employment is staggering. Students who do not graduate experience many negative consequences, such as higher rates of incarceration and lower lifetime income, health, civic engagement, and homeownership rates.⁵ In addition, the unemployment rate of high school dropouts is almost three times the rate of students with some postsecondary education. Of the high school dropouts who do find employment, they are paid nearly \$8,000 less each year than a high school graduate and over \$27,000 less each year than a college graduate.⁶

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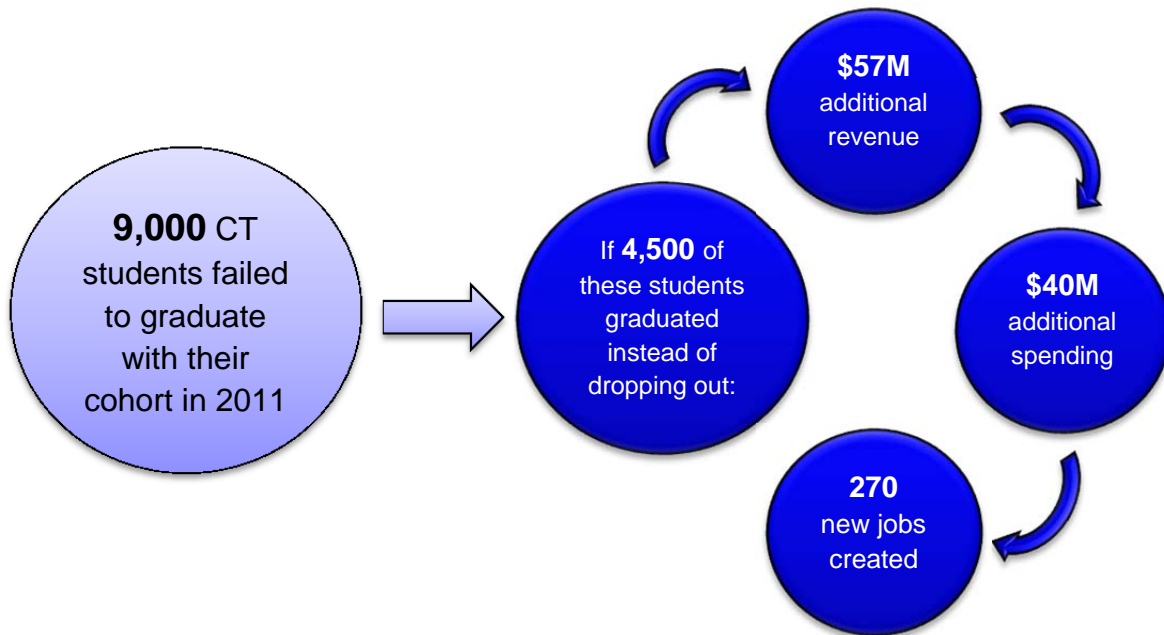


These off-track young people place a significant burden on society and taxpayers. They have high economic and social price tags, since they are less likely to be employed and more likely to rely on government support systems. The economic burden this population places on taxpayers is calculated by considering costs such as, lost tax revenue, healthcare costs paid for by taxpayers, criminal justice expenses, and welfare and social services costs. The social burden considers lost

gross earnings, health expenses, and crime costs. It is estimated that, between the ages of 16 and 24, each unemployed, out-of-school youth imposes an economic burden of \$13,900 per year and a social burden of \$37,450 per year. Over the course of his or her lifetime, a 16-year old unemployed, out-of-school youth will impose an economic burden of \$258,240 and a social burden of \$755,900. When considering the full impact of the 6.7 million youth who do not have a high school diploma and are not enrolled in school, the total economic burden is calculated at \$1.56 trillion, while the total social burden is \$4.75 trillion.⁹ These remarkably high numbers reveal the significant economic impact of this population.

This nationwide impact leads one to consider what would happen in Connecticut if we found solutions to help OU youth succeed, rather than allowing them to drop out of high school. The following scenario illustrates the substantial impact that high school dropouts have on the state:

It is estimated that 9,000 Connecticut students failed to graduate with their cohort in 2011.¹⁰ While it is difficult to tell how many of these students were dropouts, OU youth (that is, one or more grades behind their initial cohort), or transfers to adult education programs, we may conservatively estimate that half of them are or will become dropouts. If these 4,500 dropouts instead graduated, they would generate over \$57 million in additional revenue each year. These earnings would lead to increased spending of over \$40 million, resulting in an estimated 270 new jobs.¹¹ While even these figures do not seem modest, they only apply to one half of one potential class of high school dropouts; the impacts on the Connecticut economy would be astounding, were each and every student to graduate from high school.



In addition to costing the state these significant economic benefits, each class of dropouts costs Connecticut approximately \$155.4 million in additional lifetime healthcare costs.¹² On average, high school dropouts also cost Connecticut approximately \$1,721 per year in institutionalization and related expenditures. This is 3 times higher than costs related to high school graduates, and 47 times higher than costs related to college graduates.¹³

Considering these negative economic and social consequences of dropping out, why do we continue to let so many young people slip through the cracks? How do so many students become over-age, and under-credited, and why are we not doing all that we can to help these students get back on track? The following section takes a look at how our current education system contributes to the OU student epidemic.

How the Education System Fails Struggling Youth

Dropping out of school is not a sudden act. Students experiencing difficulty in school display signs of their struggle long before they drop out; many fall behind, becoming over-age and under-credited. Most future dropouts engage in conduct strongly associated with leaving school, such as absenteeism, poor behavior, or class failures, far in advance of dropping out. These signs are part of a slow process of disengagement from school, which often begins as early as school enrollment and culminates with students leaving high school.¹⁴ Once students fall behind or drop out, the measures in place to help them get back on track are often inadequate. Frequently, they are pushed out to adult or alternative education programs. However, these programs most often lack the resources and expertise necessary to assist these high-need students. Even, if students do manage to overcome the obstacles to high school graduation, many find themselves unprepared to face the academic rigor of college coursework. In this way, the education system fails struggling students (like OU youth) at every level, from missing key high-risk warning signs, to using alternative and adult education programs as a dumping ground, and providing inadequate preparation for post-secondary education.

Early Warning Indicators

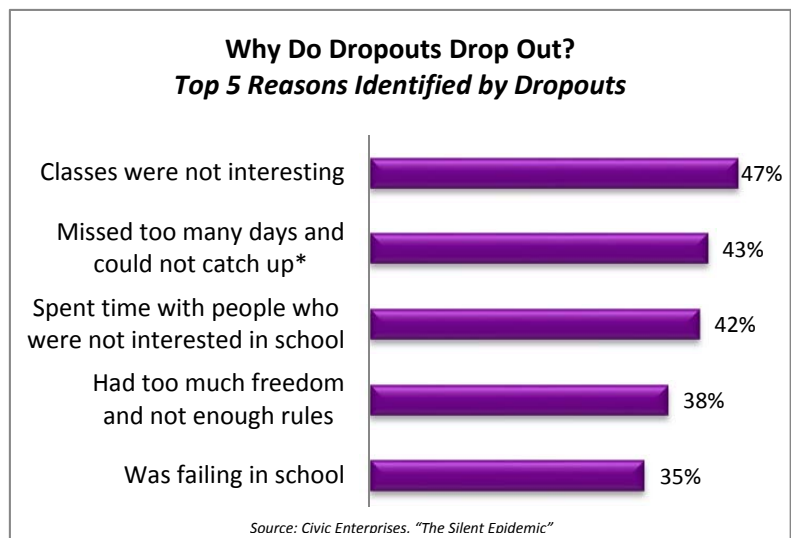
The dropout warning signs are clear. Students who fall within the lowest 25% of achievement are twenty times more likely to drop out of high school than students in the highest achieving 25%.¹⁵ Some states can identify potential dropouts even earlier than this. One Massachusetts study was able to identify future dropouts as early as fourth grade. In Philadelphia, 6th grade students that failed either a math or English course, and had attendance rates under 80%, were shown to have a 75% chance of dropping out of high school.¹⁶ These correlations may seem obvious – struggling students are logically more likely to drop out. So, why is it that students displaying these warning signs still do not receive the help they so desperately require?

One issue that many communities face is the lack of a cohesive system that can catch these warning signs in time. While many young people are involved with multiple state agencies for a myriad of issues, there is typically no single space in which to log all of their difficulties, along with all of the services that they are provided. Without this central hub, there is certainly no opportunity for all of the risk factors and warning signs to be assessed in terms of each youth’s education needs. Worse than this, any education information that is logged about a student is often lost once he moves to adult or alternative education. In Connecticut, adult and alternative education programs are treated as separate entities from the traditional school system. This means that, once a student leaves a traditional district school, they simply disappear from district rosters with no further evidence of their progress.¹⁷

While some states have started to implement student-level data systems, they typically only follow students from grade 8 through grade 12, logging basic academic achievement data.¹⁸ This type of limited data availability is just a shadow of the data system required to effectively identify at-risk students, and intervene when students are in need. States, including Connecticut, must create longitudinal data systems, allowing all stakeholders access to critical information. Teachers, administrators, parents, social service agencies, and community service groups should all be able to see a holistic picture of each student, starting from enrollment in the school system.¹⁹ This type of data system would allow the state to catch youth before they fall behind, eventually eliminating “over-age, under-credited” as a descriptor for any student in the public education system.

School Policies

Since absenteeism is highly correlated with dropping out, a good predictor of student success is school attendance. For example, 90% of high school freshmen in Chicago who missed less than one week of school each semester went on to graduate.²⁰ Nationally, when dropouts themselves were surveyed, 59% to 65% of respondents reported often missing class the year prior to dropping out.^{21*} These students described a process of disengagement that grew with each absence, making it difficult to return to school. In fact, the second most cited reason students indicated for dropping out was missing school days and experiencing difficulty catching up with work.²²



The problem of absenteeism often begins as early as kindergarten and can continue to affect student performance throughout middle school and high school. In Baltimore, for example, one out of every six elementary school students was found to be chronically absent (missing 10% or more of an entire school year). In middle school, these students exhibited poor reading and math test scores. In addition, students who were excessively absent in 6th grade were shown to have a less than 13% chance of graduating in 4 years from high school.²³

These statistics show that student absenteeism is an issue that requires more attention. Unfortunately, in many cities, weak and indifferent school and city attendance policies contribute to chronic student absence. School discipline policies also contribute to absenteeism in that they often remove students from school without providing the support they need to stay on track.²⁴ Ironically, some of these policies remove students from school due to attendance issues. In Connecticut, nearly 60% of all out-of-school suspensions can be attributed to school policy violations which include attendance and disrespect. In the 2007 to 2008 academic year, over 250,000 school days were lost due to out-of-school suspensions. While Connecticut passed a law in 2007 encouraging more effective practices than out-of-school suspensions, more needs to be done to address this problem.²⁵ This includes both finding alternatives to out-of-school suspensions for certain school policy violations, as well as providing adequate support to students who must remain out of school.

Attendance policies can be especially damaging for adult education students. Many of these students wrestled with attendance issues while enrolled in a traditional school setting. They often face difficult life circumstances that inhibit their attendance. Yet, programs like the Adult Education Credit Diploma Program adhere to strict attendance policies that are often more stringent than high school requirements. Many students enroll in these programs unaware that just 3 to 5 absences are permitted per semester. This causes many students to “absentee out” before completing the program.²⁶

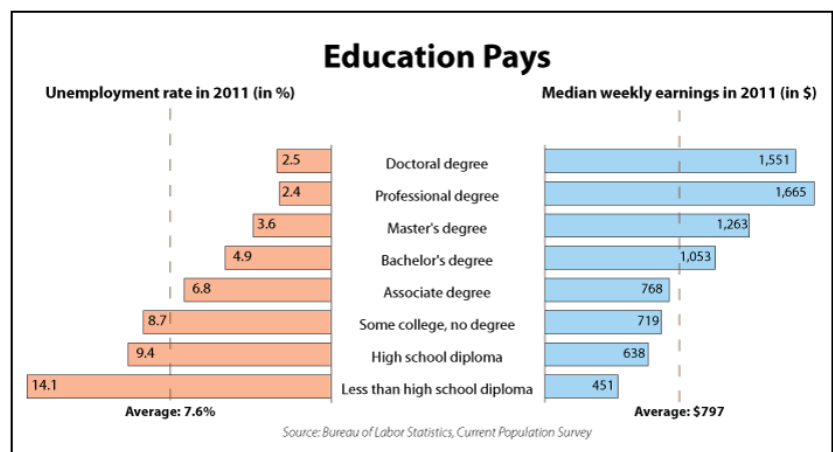
The lack of good alternative education options in Connecticut further exacerbates the attendance issue. Students who struggle in a traditional school setting, particularly with attendance issues caused by personal obligations, should be offered a more flexible option. Unfortunately, the lack of widely available alternative education programs often leaves students without a different education model. When alternative education programs do exist, they vary widely in terms of quality, content, and expectations – a particular issue in Connecticut, as the state does not specifically define alternative education’s operating criteria, standards, or reporting requirements.²⁷

Schools must work to both prevent absenteeism and address the problem of truancy once it starts. Students who struggle with attendance issues require outreach and support to ensure that they attend classes on a regular basis. They should be offered flexible options to accommodate difficult life circumstances. Sadly, the most common responses to teenage attendance issues around the country are punitive measures, rather than supportive interventions.²⁸

Inadequate College Preparation

Of the students who do graduate from high school, many find themselves inadequately prepared for the academic rigor of college. In fact, 43% of all U.S. students who begin a 4-year degree do not finish within six years. Poor high school preparation for college level coursework contributes to this low completion rate. Approximately 40% of all college freshmen must take remedial education courses, and this number is even higher for minority students.²⁹ Hispanic and African American students are more likely to require remediation than their white peers, with 41% of Hispanic students and 42% of African American students requiring remediation as compared to 31% of white students.³⁰ These high remediation rates are particularly unsettling because students enrolled in remedial courses are about 50% less likely to graduate from college than students who do not need remediation. In fact, the more remedial courses a student must take, the less likely it is that they will complete their degree.³¹ In Connecticut, only 11-16% of entering community college students will ever graduate.

The fact that remedial classes utilize resources to teach students course material for a second time also reflects the high cost these classes have on students and society. Nationally, the cost of remediation classes for students enrolled in public institutions in the 2007 to 2008 academic school year was estimated at \$3.6 billion. Due to the low college completion rate associated with remediation, these courses add an additional cost to the public related to the financial aid and tuition relief provided to these students. Between 2003 and 2008, approximately \$1.4 billion dollars was spent by states to provide financial assistance to students who ultimately did not go on to complete their degree. The federal government spent over \$1.5 billion on this same group.³² These state and federal dollars are a wasted investment, with no return, as college dropouts fail to attract high paying jobs and produce the same economic and social benefits as college graduates. In fact, students who do not graduate from college earn an average of \$17,000 less each year than those who hold a bachelor's degree. In addition, the unemployment rate of a college dropout is nearly double that of an individual with a bachelor's degree.³³ This results in lost tax revenue and lost earnings that would positively contribute to the economy.³⁴



Students themselves pay a high cost for inadequate college preparation. They lose out financially because remedial credits cannot typically be counted towards a diploma, causing students to pay for costly classes that fail to bring them any closer to obtaining their college degree.³⁵ Students in remedial course work also suffer negative emotional consequences. A 2008 study of remedial

students found that almost all students thought they were ready for college level work and were startled to learn that they must take remedial classes. Of the negative emotions experienced by these students, 37% felt frustrated, 21% felt surprised, 18% felt embarrassed, and 12% were angry.³⁶

Perhaps most alarming, however, is the fact that students across the country who do require remedial education were considered to be good students in high school. Four out of five remedial students earned a high school GPA of 3.0 or above and reported nearly always completing high school assignments. In addition, many remedial students found high school classes easy, with 50% wishing high school had been more difficult in order to adequately prepare them for the challenge of college.³⁷ The fact that most remedial college students were considered good students in high school is particularly concerning, especially when considering lower-performing students. If good students are struggling in college, how will fair- and poor-performing high school students navigate the post-secondary world?

Connecticut also feels the effects of inadequate college preparation. A 2010 report by Connecticut's P-20 Council estimates that 80% of Connecticut's entering community college students are required to take a developmental course in math, English, or both (as compared to 43% of entering community college students requiring remediation nationwide).³⁸ These high rates of remediation come with a large price tag. In the 2007 to 2008 academic year, Connecticut spent about \$84 million on remedial education.³⁹ If the need for college remediation courses in Connecticut was reduced, it is estimated that the state would benefit from a \$103 million boost to the state economy. This number reflects annual course savings if fewer students required remediation, as well as the earning difference between students who complete some college and students who graduate with a bachelor's degree.⁴⁰

Reducing the need for college remediation courses is essential to assist both students and the state. To combat this issue, high schools should implement post-secondary readiness programs to ensure that students are learning the information they need in order to succeed once they get to college.

Alternative and Adult Education as Dumping Grounds

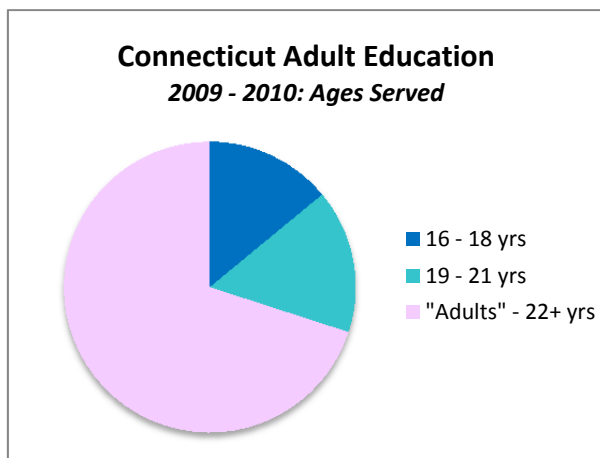
Early warning data systems, attendance outreach, and focused college preparation could all help OU youth succeed in the education system. Traditional schools could easily use these tools to support struggling students. Instead, many traditional schools choose to dump students who are not succeeding into adult and alternative education programs. In fact, some teachers and school administrators actively push students out of traditional high schools and into these programs. Pressure to report high test scores and meet No Child Left Behind's Annual Yearly Progress standards incentivizes school districts to remove struggling and disruptive students from their classrooms. Because of gaps in reporting requirements, school administrators know that removing these students will likely result in better overall academic performance for their school.

By pushing these students out, schools effectively avoid responsibility and accountability for their most vulnerable student populations.⁴¹

The types of Connecticut students who are pushed out of traditional public schools are typically older students with behavioral, truancy, and/or academic issues (in addition to being primarily minority males). These students are counseled to enroll in adult or alternative education programs, despite the fact that they have a legal right to receive a “regular” public school education until they reach the age of 21. This information is often kept from both students and parents who are misled to believe that they have no choice other than to withdraw from the traditional school setting and enroll in an adult or alternative education program.⁴² Students are also told that alternative or adult education will improve their chances of success. Unfortunately, this is often not the case, as Connecticut’s adult and alternative programs come with their own drawbacks for struggling students.

Adult education programs are not well-equipped to deal with the academic and behavioral challenges that often accompany these struggling student populations.⁴³ They are structured to serve the needs of adults, giving students more autonomy, and typically have fewer resources to support the many needs of recent high school dropouts.⁴⁴ In addition, adult education programs have surprisingly low completion rates, and many of the credentials issued (such as the GED) have not been shown to increase student earnings or job placement potential.⁴⁵

Despite these facts, the number of young people served by adult education programs in Connecticut is alarmingly high. In the 2010 academic school year, the State of Connecticut spent



\$44,322,719 in state, local, and federal funds to provide adult education services to 30,889 individuals across 350 program sites. During this time, these programs served 5,056 students between the ages of 16 and 18. This age group accounted for 16% of all enrolled students. Another 4,492 students (over 14% of those served) were between the ages of 19 and 21. Together, students between the ages of 16 and 21 (all of whom were still eligible for a public school education) made up over 30% of all students served through adult education

programs. These demographic characteristics have remained relatively constant since 2006. While adult education can serve as an important tool for older adults, the program is not appropriate for most recent high school dropouts. Not only are high school-aged students too young to be best served by a program structured for adults, but most dropouts have additional issues and needs, which adult education programs have never been equipped to handle. Young students should have access to innovative educational resources that have the proper tools to handle their unique challenges.⁴⁶

While adult education is not the solution, alternative education programs have the potential to serve as the innovative educational choice that Connecticut's struggling youth need. Unfortunately, many of these programs seem to fall short. The quality of alternative programs seems to vary widely, and numerous programs do not use innovative educational strategies that provide a true alternative to traditional instruction. While a select few programs have been reported to help students reengage in education, many others are simply a place for students to be discarded when they do not excel in traditional schools. Of course, this is difficult to say with certainty, as Connecticut holds little information on alternative programs. In fact, it is not even known exactly how many alternative education programs exist in Connecticut, as the State Department of Education does not track this information. Unlike traditional schools, alternative programs are not required to submit a strategic school profile or provide data indicating student achievement.⁴⁷ Overall, they are not held accountable by the state for the students they serve or the programs they provide, although they are serving the students who need Connecticut's help the most.

Because the state does not track the success of alternative students or programs, it is easy for districts to underfund alternative education. As a result, alternative programs labor to address the many needs of their students without adequate resources. Many of these schools and programs lack basic tools, such as current textbooks, functional computers, and guidance counselors. When teachers in these schools are interviewed, they often describe inadequate staffing and instructional supports.⁴⁸ This is an unfortunate missed opportunity. Alternative education programs could serve as a new chance for struggling students; instead, they are often an underfunded, under-resourced dumping ground.

To make alternative education a viable option for struggling students, these programs require innovative strategies. When combined with additional supports like equitable funding and access to student-level data, Connecticut can give our struggling students the skills that they need to achieve success.

The Solution

Students who struggle in the traditional education system face a myriad of problems, but a dearth of solutions. Without the appropriate supports, these students often become over-age and under-credited, disengaging from school and frequently dropping out altogether. The problems that they face require groundbreaking recuperative educational strategies and unique learning environments to help them succeed. However, these strategies cannot succeed without the appropriate policy supports from the state. First and foremost, the state must create and support innovation space, allowing schools to implement inventive, alternative techniques to re-engage students. Issues like student-level data, equitable funding, and post-secondary readiness must also be addressed to support these initiatives and help OU and struggling youth succeed in and beyond high school.

Creating and Supporting Innovation Space

Innovative, recuperative education strategies can both assist students who are currently behind, and ensure that future students do not fall behind.⁴⁹ To foster the development and dispersion of innovative learning environments, state educational structures must be flexible, and state policies must reflect adequate funding and appropriate supports. Unfortunately, in most states, the current education system does not provide the flexibility or financing needed to support innovation. States routinely underfund alternative education environments, including contract and charter schools, despite the fact that these learning environments have been shown to foster innovation and successfully assist student populations that require additional supports. To truly reinvent education, it is important to comprehensively support innovative efforts through flexibility and funding, both state and nationwide.⁵⁰

Oklahoma and Minnesota are two states that exemplify the policy conditions needed to support the development of innovative education models to assist students at-risk of dropping out of high school. Since 1996, Oklahoma has funded alternative education programs for students at-risk of dropping out through its Statewide Alternative Education Academy grant program. The state provides 17 research-based criteria that districts can use to guide their programs while still maintaining their own flexibility. This supportive environment has resulted in 250 programs across Oklahoma, serving approximately 10,000 students, annually.⁵¹ Minnesota also has an expansive network of alternative education programs, with over 150 alternative learning centers and programs throughout the state. Further, Minnesota law requires school funding to follow individual students, wherever they attend school. This provision applies to alternative programs, including those operated by third parties such as community-based organizations.⁵² By allowing funding to follow the student, all types of schools, including alternative programs, receive equitable funding and students can choose which school best fits their needs.

Aside from these states, select cities across the country have changed policy conditions to allow for the implementation and growth of innovative models, offering students who have not

succeeded in the traditional school setting opportunities to achieve success in other ways. In Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Youth Network is working to improve educational and economic outcomes for youth. A key component within the Network is Project U-Turn. Project U-Turn was launched in 2006, with an ambitious pledge from the Mayor to cut the city's dropout rate in half in five to seven years. The project aims to focus attention on, and address the city's dropout crisis by expanding resources and public awareness, increasing the number of high-quality education programs, and educating the highest risk youth who are often the most difficult to serve. Members of the Project U-Turn collaborative include the Philadelphia School District, city agencies, foundations, youth-serving organizations, parents, and youth.⁵³

In their April 2009 report, Project U-Turn highlights the progress it has made since the initial program launch in 2006. Since then, 1,622 out-of-school youth have been referred to U-Turn's recuperative educational programs, two new high schools were created, and a new Re-engagement Center for former dropouts was established. The graduation rate in Philadelphia is also moving in the right direction, rising from 48.9% for the 2006 cohort, to 58.7% for the 2008 cohort.⁵⁴ In addition to Project U-Turn, Philadelphia offers a wide range of programs and services aimed at helping students get back on track to graduate. These programs are managed through The School District of Philadelphia's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation.⁵⁵

New York City also has an Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG), which offers struggling students a portfolio of options to get back on track. The OMPG provides four main pathways for youth at-risk of dropping out of high school, or for those who have already dropped out: Learning to Work, Transfer High Schools, Access GED Programs, and Young Adults Borough Centers. Each program provides a unique atmosphere in which to re-engage students while providing them with important skills.⁵⁶

In Connecticut, more must be done to create policy conditions supportive of innovative learning environments. This will allow alternative learning models to grow and advance, helping the most at-risk and struggling students. The vast majority of school districts only provide a single, traditional high school approach to accommodate all students with a wide variety of learning styles and abilities. This "one size fits all" approach stifles educator creativity and limits student engagement.

Despite Connecticut's lack of progress in this area, school models nationwide have demonstrated successful alternative education strategies.⁵⁷ Charter, magnet, and other public school choice models have, in particular, shown that they are the perfect breeding ground for the expansion of innovative educational strategies. From the type of school governance to when, where and how students learn, national models have shown what can work to get struggling and OU students back on track.

New York City – Multiple Pathways to Graduation

New York City's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG) offers an excellent example of how over-age, under-credited youth can benefit from policies that support a range of innovative education strategies. In fact, many of the innovative strategies being used across the country are modeled after ideas initially established in New York.⁵⁸

At the heart of the OMPG initiative is a focus on the over-age, under-credited population. This is because nearly all (93%) of the high school dropouts in New York City fall into the category of over-age and under-credited. Through OMPG, students are provided with a range of rigorous academic options, coursework connected with job opportunities, and comprehensive support services. OMPG recognizes that OU youth require different educational models to succeed and therefore provides multiple options.⁵⁹ The four main programs offered by OMPG are⁶⁰:

Transfer High Schools

Transfer High Schools offer personalized learning environments targeted to meet the needs of OU youth, ages 16 and 17, who are working toward a high school diploma. These schools hold students to high academic standards but offer support to help youth reach their goals. About 9,550 students are currently enrolled in 30 schools across New York City.

Learning to Work

Workforce preparation is provided at select Transfer High Schools, Young Adult Borough Centers and GED programs.⁶¹ Through Learning to Work, students engage in workshops to enhance their employability skills. Youth can also access college and career counseling, subsidized internships, and job placement services. A number of student support services are also available, such as counseling, tutoring, and attendance outreach.⁶²

Access GED Programs

These programs offer full and part-time enrollment, and are structured around best practices to engage young adults. An age and culturally appropriate curriculum is utilized and student support systems are available. When paired with the Learning to Work program, youth can both work on their academic skills and advance their career. All GED students receive individualized attention to help them set and achieve their personal education and workplace goals.⁶³

Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs)

These Centers operate in existing schools to provide full-time, evening academics. Course work is personalized so students can obtain the credits they need to graduate. These programs are open online to students who are 17 and a half and older, and who have obtained at least 17 credits. YABCs are operated collaboratively between the Department of Education and a community-based organization. Students receive support services, career and college counseling, and job placement.⁶⁴

As a result of these efforts, New York City has increased its graduation rates for OU youth. In 2005, OU youth graduated from high school in New York at a rate of just 19%. Since the implementation of the OMPG strategies, Transfer Schools boast a graduation rate of 52.5%. District-wide improvement has been seen as well, with the City's dropout rate decreasing from 22% in 2005 to 11.8% in 2009.⁶⁵

Contract and Charter Schools

Some of the best incubators of innovative educational strategies are schools that are allowed to function outside of the traditional education system's constraints, such as contract and charter schools. Charter schools have gained notoriety across the country for their impressive achievement gains and a pervasive culture of student success.⁶⁶ Contract schools, though a lesser known governance structure, have also demonstrated success with innovative models. Both alternative school models allow for flexible settings where learning can be specifically geared toward high risk student populations, like OU youth. Due to this flexibility, these public schools of choice can use unique strategies to improve student performance such as, extended school days, intensive parent involvement, and whole student supports, to name a few. Most innovative

Chicago Public Schools – Contract Schools

The Chicago Public School system (CPS) is the third largest school district in the United States. Since the 1980s, Chicago's parents, citizens, and interest groups have all been aware of the troubled academic performance of Chicago Schools and the urgent need for reform.⁶⁷ To improve city schools, Chicago has seen several waves of major school reform efforts. The first occurred with the passage of the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988. This act moved the district toward a more autonomous system, wherein each school controlled many of its own operations. Decentralizing control allowed each school to create and implement its own school improvement plan. The law also led to increased involvement and support from nonprofit organizations.⁶⁸

While initial reform efforts worked in some schools, it became clear that additional efforts were still necessary. In 1995 changes were made to the Chicago School Reform Act, which gave Chicago's Mayor, Richard Daley, greater control over the school system. At this time, Mayor Daley appointed Paul Vallas as chief executive officer of CPS. Vallas and Daley believed in the charter school movement as a way of infusing innovation into CPS. They were frustrated by Chicago's 15 charter school limit imposed by the state legislature, and searched for ways to increase the number of public choice schools in the city. Vallas drew from his business approach to school management, and his experience contracting out school maintenance and janitorial services to private companies, to create a new type of school model: contract schools.⁶⁹

Contract schools are public schools operated by an independent group that has an established contract with a public agency.⁷⁰ These schools can vary, with some resembling traditional school models, while others serve special student populations in small academy-like settings. Contract schools are often run by nonprofit organizations and (unlike most charter schools) can have selective enrollment, choosing to serve a particular segment of a city's population.⁷¹

Contract schools exist to this day in Chicago, and may be operated by community organizations, universities, foundations, and teachers. They are held accountable by the Chicago Board of Education and enrollment occurs through a random lottery.⁷² Since their inception, contract schools have spread across the country, with schools being established in cities like Minneapolis, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Baltimore, Miami, and Hartford, to name just a few.⁷³

strategies cannot be properly implemented in traditional public schools because they do not offer the same flexibility.⁷⁴ Innovative ideas must be tested in small, flexible settings before being disseminated across the traditional public school system. Contract, charter, and other innovative school models have shown that they can work for students who struggle in the traditional setting. They may also provide the perfect setting for innovative ideas to be honed before being broadly implemented in larger school settings.

Parent Engagement

Among the innovative techniques most popularly attributed to charter schools is increased parent engagement. Parent involvement is defined as being aware and involved in a child's schoolwork, understanding the relationship between parenting and student academic success, and being committed to communicating with teachers and administrators about a student's progress.⁷⁵ A significant body of research supports the idea that parent involvement is instrumental to student academic success. Numerous studies have found a variety of beneficial outcomes from parent involvement, including better student educational performance, better classroom behavior, improved school attendance, and increased student emotional well-being. Schools also benefit from increased parental involvement because involved parents are committed to supporting the school's mission and providing additional assistance when needed.⁷⁶

Parental involvement has been shown to be particularly helpful for middle school and high school students. Students that are considered to be high-achievers typically have parents that talk with them about school, provide encouragement, and discuss higher education. These students also often have parents who help them focus on learning and ensure that they complete homework assignments.⁷⁷ If a student is to succeed in school, it is essential for families, community members, and school staff to have a positive relationship and stay engaged in a student's education.⁷⁸

Schools can involve parents in a variety of ways. First, parents should have an understanding of what their child is learning. They should also be provided with information about how they can continue to help their child at home, including information about how to help their children plan for college and a career. When parent involvement is paired with high-quality teachers and schools, it is a highly effective recipe for student success.⁷⁹

Competency-Based Learning

Competency-based learning is an important alternative education strategy, especially for students who struggle in the traditional school setting. Under this system, students progress upon mastery of a particular subject area, rather than when they complete a classroom time requirement. This method employs explicit learning objectives that are measured through meaningful and useful assessment, rather than through seat time.⁸⁰

Competency-based learning is particularly useful for OU youth, as a significant barrier to getting these students back on track is the amount of time they are required to spend in class engaged in credit recovery. Traditional “seat-time” requirements do not allow youth to acquire credits without taking entire courses, a portion of which they have often already sat through. This method can lead to school disengagement and low achievement levels.⁸¹ To overcome this barrier, alternative education programs should include flexible credit recovery options based on demonstrated content mastery, not time spent in the classroom.⁸²

In addition to its use in recuperative education practices like credit recovery, this innovative practice should be applied to all courses. Utilizing competency-based learning for all coursework

New Hampshire – Competency-Based and Expanded Learning Innovation

In 2005, New Hampshire became the first state to require high schools to award credit based on competency, rather than on time spent in the classroom. Districts were given until the 2008-2009 academic year to switch to a competency-based credit system, with the freedom to determine their own definitions of competency within each discipline. The state is now working to alter grading systems and report cards to fit the new competency-based learning model. Competency-based report cards differ from traditional grading systems, in that they separate attitude and effort from topic mastery, so grades reflect when a student has mastered a subject area. This model supports the idea that grades are not fixed, but rather, that they are always evolving. If a student has difficulty with a particular topic and does poorly on an exam, he or she will be given the opportunity to relearn the material and take the test again. In competency-based learning, the focus is placed on making sure a student masters a concept, rather than on what a student scores on a single exam.⁸³

New Hampshire is also focused on emphasizing “anytime, anywhere” learning. The state’s competency-based learning approach has opened the door to expanded learning opportunities. Students now have the option to engage in out-of-school education through a variety of approaches such as, online courses, community service, apprenticeships, and independent studies. These programs personalize education for New Hampshire students, allowing them to tailor their learning to fit their individual interests and needs.⁸⁴ For example, New Hampshire’s Virtual Learning Academy Charter School allows students to complete coursework at any time and even offers advanced placement and dual-credit high school and college classes. New Hampshire’s Experimental Learning Opportunities (ELOs) blend online coursework with internships to meet course requirements.⁸⁵ New Hampshire has moved beyond the one-size-fits-all approach to learning to explore a unique and creative system of options for how students can successfully build and apply their skills.⁸⁶

According to a 2011 evaluation by the University of Massachusetts, most students who took part in New Hampshire’s extended learning opportunities believed that they learned more in their ELO coursework than they would have by taking the same type of course in a typical classroom setting. Positive results were also seen with regard to student self-confidence, work-readiness, and awareness of the skills they will need to be successful in the future. The evaluation also found that the addition of ELOs encouraged work in expanding competency-based learning practices.⁸⁷

will prevent students from falling behind by keeping them fully engaged in course material. Competency-based learning ensures that students will be working on class materials at the education levels that are appropriately challenging for their individual expertise. Students will not progress to more difficult topics without the skills they require, nor will they become bored, stagnating at a learning level that they have already surpassed. Competency-based learning truly personalizes the education experience for each individual and helps each student take responsibility for their own education.⁸⁸ It also ensures that students are prepared at every level of schooling, as they will not progress without proving concept mastery. This, too, helps struggling students, as many progress from level to level, without mastering coursework. This leads to a loss of skills between grade promotions, which further contributes to a student's eventual disengagement.

To promote competency-based learning, state and federal efforts should be tailored to support this innovative method. Some states with supportive policies require districts to offer competency-based options and alternative schools with credit recovery programs. Other states have established quality control measures, expanded learning options (such as online courses), and provided teacher training support for competency-based learning.⁸⁹ More states need to provide these types of supports so competency-based learning can improve the success of OU youth across the nation.

Blended Learning and Extended Learning Time

As seen in the case of New Hampshire, competency-based learning lends itself well to the incorporation of additional alternative education strategies. Approaches like “anywhere, anytime” learning and integrating technology into education, a strategy called blended learning, are natural partners to competency-based models, and offer more ways to personalize education and assist OU youth. The use of technology enables each student to control the pace of their individual lesson, as well as the path of instruction that makes sense for their specific needs. This allows students to focus on topics that are difficult for them for as long as necessary, while moving quickly through topics that they can easily grasp. This innovative educational strategy can be an especially useful recuperative tool for OU youth in alternative education settings. Blended learning helps both students and teachers to address individual academic concerns, ensuring true mastery of concepts at the individual level. Face-to-face instruction can then be provided to engage students in interactive learning experiences, and work on higher-level thinking and problem solving skills. Blended learning allows students to have access to the best features of both online and in-person instruction.⁹⁰

Since technology can provide students with instruction at any time of day, even when they are out of school, or away from the classroom, blended learning often naturally partners well with an extended learning approach. Extended learning time has come to mean both extended day (e.g. ending at 4pm instead of 2pm) and extended year (e.g. attending school year-round with intermittent vacations, rather than a long summer break). This approach not only gives students

more time to learn, but also less “off” time to disengage from school.⁹¹ In fact, the amount of time a student spends engaged in learning has been identified as one of the strongest predictors of their academic success. Students typically spend 6.5 hours a day, for 180 days, in the classroom; but, it has been shown that this is not enough to equip students with the knowledge they need to succeed.⁹² Supporting and creating learning models that cater to extended learning time is crucial to the success of all students. However, these learning techniques can be particularly vital for struggling student populations.

One particularly important issue that extended learning addresses is that of summer learning loss – that is, the negative impact of a long summer vacation on student learning and information retention.⁹³ While all students experience learning loss in the summer months, low-income students’ learning loss is far more dramatic. This can be attributed, in part, to the fact that affluent students typically engage in educational activities during the summer months, such as summer camps, dance and swim classes, and music lessons, while low-income students typically spend time engaged in non-educational activities, such as watching television, working, and caring for their siblings.⁹⁴ Therefore, extending learning time, particularly for low-income

Massachusetts – Extended Learning

Massachusetts leads the nation in student academic achievement. However, like many states, Massachusetts has struggled to close the achievement gap between its wealthy students and their lower-income peers. In an effort to address this gap, Massachusetts implemented extended learning strategies beginning with just 10 schools in 2005. Since then, extended learning time has expanded to reach over 10,000 students in 19 schools across the state. These students (78% of which are low income) spend an additional 300 hours learning each school year.⁹⁵

The results of this initiative demonstrate that a well-designed, high-quality extended learning experience can improve student achievement. Since 2006, student outcomes on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) have steadily improved for students with access to extended learning. Participating schools have seen an 8% increase in the percent of students scoring “advanced” or “proficient” in English Language Arts, an almost 20% increase in the percent of students that scoring “advanced” or “proficient” in math, and an almost 10% increase in the percent of students that scoring “advanced” or “proficient” in science. Students in these extended learning environments also spend a great deal more time in enrichment and academic support activities, averaging an additional 7 hours of instruction each week in activities such as art, music, and physical education.⁹⁶

An example of a particularly successful Massachusetts extended learning time school is the Matthew J. Kuss Middle School located in Fall River. Prior to implementing extended learning, Kuss was determined to be “chronically underperforming,” and was in danger of being closed. Since implementing extended learning in 2006, students at Kuss have made astounding gains.⁹⁷ The percent of Kuss students scoring “advanced” or “proficient” in math on the MCAS has risen from just over 12% in 2006, to over 46% in 2010. Aptitude in English Language Arts has also increased dramatically, from 41% of students scoring “advanced” or “proficient” in 2006, to over 57% of students scoring at these levels in 2010.⁹⁸

students, is a promising method that could be used to close the achievement gap between low-income youth and their better-off peers. For instance, a study found that students who participated in summer education programs for 3 years, and attended consistently, made gains of up to 50% of a grade level on standardized tests.⁹⁹ Extending learning time (longer year and day) in New York charter schools also increased achievement, as compared to charter schools following more traditional time models.¹⁰⁰

One of the best known, high-quality, school models that increases learning time is the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). At KIPP schools, students spend approximately 60% more time in school than their peers. In addition, they engage in extracurricular activities to build self-confidence and increase their skills.¹⁰¹ According to KIPP's 2010 Report Card, 63% of KIPP students are outperforming national peers in reading and 47% in math by the end of kindergarten. By 8th grade, these numbers increase to 66% of students outperforming their national peers in reading and 54% in math.¹⁰²

Both blended and extended learning time approaches are slowly proving their worth in many learning environments, some aimed at at-risk students, others not. However, both approaches seem fitting for our struggling students, considering the issues that OU youth face in their personal and academic lives. It should be noted that merely extending learning time, without ensuring the quality of learning experiences, has not been shown to improve academic performance. Since low-income students are more likely to attend low performing schools with inexperienced teachers, it is important to improve and ensure the quality of a student's education before extending learning time.¹⁰³ State and federal education reform efforts should champion these methods as a way to not only assist struggling students, but to best prepare all students for success in an internationally competitive job market.

Additional Policy Supports

The creation of innovation space will allow each of these alternative education strategies the flexibility that they need to help struggling students. However, these strategies need additional policy supports to succeed in the long-term. While innovation space will give inventive approaches ample room to grow, advancement will rely on policy considerations like equitable funding, student-level data availability, and post-secondary preparation standards.

Adequate Funding

Student success is impossible without adequately funded schools and education programs. This is especially true for programs that serve high-risk student populations, such as OU youth, as these students typically require additional resources and innovative supports to succeed. Unfortunately, state and local funding barriers typically limit school strategies and innovations to re-engage troubled students.¹⁰⁴

In Connecticut, school funding has traditionally lacked the flexibility to support the variety of schools and programs that should be available to serve students with various learning needs. For example, students enrolled in Connecticut’s charter and magnet schools do not receive equal funding, when compared with students enrolled in traditional schools.¹⁰⁵ This stems from the fact that traditional school districts receive per pupil funding through the state’s Education Cost Sharing grant formula, whereas public choice schools are accounted for in separate line items. This has been the cause of charter schools historically receiving 75% or less of per pupil funding, compared with traditional schools. This unfair practice not only penalizes students attending non-traditional schools, but is also highly inefficient. Because funding for Connecticut’s public choice schools is accounted for separately, the state often pays twice for students attending public choice schools – once in their home district, and a second time in their public choice school.¹⁰⁶

Alternative programs often meet with even worse circumstances. As they are not defined, but only peripherally referred to, in Connecticut statute, they run the gamut of size, quality, and funding levels. The Connecticut State Department of Education does not track alternative programs, so it is difficult to assess the average per pupil funding amount. However, recent studies delving into this issue note that this lack of accountability leads to gross under-funding. One study quotes an alternative school educator as saying that their Board of Education sees them as a cost savings measure, as they spend less than half of the dollar amount per pupil, compared with students attending the mainstream high school.¹⁰⁷

Connecticut must address these funding inequities if alternative education strategies are to truly help its population of struggling students. The state must support policies that give each student at any public school the appropriate funding level for their specific needs. Specifically, strategies such as student-based budgeting, wherein a student’s funding follows them to any public school, would allow for the growth of proven public choice school models.

Compulsory Attendance Age

Equitable funding will help to ensure that public schools of choice and alternative programs are high quality. However, students must also be given a reason to choose one of these options, rather than Adult Education, which often seems like a faster route. Many struggling high school students, facing issues ranging from family obligations to different learning styles, drop out and enter Adult Education programs, seeking to attain a GED, instead. In addition to overestimating the value of a GED, many of these students underestimate the difficulty of earning one. 40% of dropouts surveyed by National Center for Educational Statistics reported that they considered the ease of getting a GED during their decision to drop out of school. However, the reality is that only 60% of GED test-takers pass on their first try.¹⁰⁸ This leads to the phenomenon of “double dropout,” which describes the tendency of 16-20 year old youth to drop out of high school, and then drop out of Adult Education.¹⁰⁹ For example, of the 526 New Haven youth, ages 16-18, which enrolled in Adult Education in 2009, only 118 completed a GED.¹¹⁰

This “double dropout” phenomenon only contributes to the high school dropout population, which is fraught with criminal involvement and labor market difficulties. Even those who do receive a GED will face lower rates of employment and poorer labor market outcomes, as compared to individuals with a high school diploma.¹¹¹ Based on this research, it is clear that youth face better options when completing high school and earning a high school diploma. One strategy to achieve this goal is to increase the compulsory school attendance age. While research surrounding the impact of increasing the student dropout age remains inconclusive, compulsory attendance laws have been shown in some studies to encourage approximately one-quarter of potential high school dropouts to stay in school.¹¹² Requiring that students enroll in school until the age of 18, paired with high-quality public schools of choice and alternative education programs, will help students remain in school and experience the benefits that come with a high school diploma.

Post-Secondary Readiness

Keeping students in school is only half of the ultimate objective; in order to maintain a successful community, individuals must also succeed after high school. For this to happen, they must be adequately prepared for college and career during their high school years. When students are not adequately prepared for success in post-secondary education, it often leads to another major obstacle to student success: college remediation. A high rate of remedial course enrollment at community colleges can be seen nationwide, with nearly 50% of students entering two-year colleges being placed in remedial courses. Less than 10% of these students complete their degree in three years and only about a third complete their degree in six years.¹¹³

A number of strategies can be used to ensure that high school graduates are positioned for post-secondary success. First, requirements for entry into college should be aligned with requirements for high school graduation. The Common Core State Standards Initiative in reading, writing, and math is an important step in this alignment process. These standards focus on the key content areas necessary to ensure post-secondary success while also providing students with the opportunity to apply critical thinking strategies and analytical problem solving skills to their work.¹¹⁴ In addition to providing the opportunity to align high school and first-year college level work, the Common Core offers states the chance to develop support programs for transition to college and courses that bridge the divide between high school and post-secondary studies.¹¹⁵ This type of preparation will eradicate the need for remedial college courses, instead allowing students to proceed directly to entry-level courses and remain on the path to a timely graduation.

Some states have taken on high-school and post-secondary alignment without the assistance of the Common Core. A good example of this can be found in Indiana where K-12 schools and higher education came together to jointly develop graduation requirements and minimum college admission prerequisites. Established in 2005, Indiana’s requirements (named Core 40) ensure that students who graduate from Indiana high schools have the minimum admission requirements for enrollment in Indiana’s public universities.¹¹⁶

Another strategy to increase student readiness for college is to offer dual enrollment courses at the high school level. Dual enrollment occurs when high school students are provided with the opportunity to enroll in a college course that, upon completion, counts towards both high school and college credit. According to the Community College Research Center, 71% of high schools offer dual enrollment programs. This is significant, as dual enrollment programs offer several advantages to students. First, they provide students with a realistic picture of the academic challenges they will face in college. Second, they give students a head start on college coursework and often reduce the overall cost of college by providing access to college credit at little or no cost. Finally, dual enrollment reduces the overall time it takes a student to complete a college degree.¹¹⁷ This is critical because research has shown that the longer it takes a student to complete college, the more responsibilities they take on (like jobs, children, and mortgages) and the less likely they are to ultimately graduate.¹¹⁸ Dual enrollment opportunities fit well with other innovative strategies such as blended learning, which offers the necessary technological platforms, as well as extended day/year, which offers extra time for students to enroll in these courses.

Finally, schools should invest in workforce development programs to help keep students engaged and enrolled in school. Research has shown that youth with early work experiences cultivate the basic skills many employers require, such as attendance, dress, and ability to work with others. Early work experiences, during teen and young adult years, also lead to higher earnings and increased access to more formal training opportunities in later years.¹¹⁹ Further, it has been reported that students engaged in employment experiences during high school are more likely to remain in and complete their secondary education.¹²⁰ Workforce development, coupled with focused post-secondary education preparation, will prepare all students for the post-secondary path of their choice.

Early Warning Data System

Each of these three additional policy supports will lend assistance to students who have struggled in school, most often falling behind or dropping out. However, perhaps an even more important tool in the long-term is one that will allow education systems to catch struggling students *before* they fall behind. One of the most important tools necessary to catch these students and offer them appropriate supports is a statewide early warning data system. An effective early warning indicator system engages teachers, administrators, parents, state agencies, and community service groups to keep all stakeholders informed of student performance and all students on track to graduate. State longitudinal early warning data systems are centered on identifying students who show characteristics associated with dropping out. The system then allows for collaboration across schools and service providers to rapidly intervene and assist these students.¹²¹ Data systems should have the capacity to follow students anywhere. Whether they enroll in alternative education, or remain in a traditional school setting, it is important that no student falls through the cracks. Understanding this, several states have implemented policies allowing stakeholders at

every level to access vital student data and use the information to improve outcomes for students.¹²²

Colorado's SchoolView data platform, launched in 2009, provides an excellent example of a longitudinal data system that contains many of the elements necessary for student success. SchoolView supports 178 Colorado school districts and over 800,000 students. The system was developed by the state, in partnership with school districts, to provide key stakeholders with access to statewide longitudinal data on the educational performance of a particular classroom, school, district, or individual child. SchoolView allows stakeholders to view, sort, and compare instructional and student-specific data and provides visualization tools such as charts, graphs, and maps. By using these tools, stakeholders can understand the success of an individual school, child, or district, relative to the performance of the rest of the state. SchoolView also monitors early warning indicators, such as attendance, discipline, and grades, to get students the help they need to stay on track.¹²³ It is this type of data system that would pair well with innovative approaches, allowing education systems to catch students before they fall behind and offer them the appropriate supports.

State and Federal Reform Efforts

Innovative strategies, like competency-based and blended learning, extended school time, parent involvement, and innovative school models are just some of the techniques working for struggling youth across the country. However, it has become clear that, for these and other strategies to be pervasive and effective, state and federal law must provide ample support. As the high school dropout crisis has to come to a head, efforts to support struggling youth have intensified at both levels.

Federal Reform Efforts

Education reform efforts at the federal level came into sharp focus in January 2012, when President Obama focused a section of his State of the Union Address on the nation's dropout crisis. In his Address, he focused on specific techniques aimed at alleviating the country's dropout problem. He endorsed strategies such as, increasing the compulsory school attendance age to 18, providing resources to reward good teachers, and increasing flexibility to dismiss poor teachers.¹²⁴ While these reforms are a step in the right direction, education reform efforts must focus on the unique educational needs of every student, particularly those students most likely to drop out, like OU youth.¹²⁵ While there is still significant work to be done, progress has been made toward addressing the needs of this student population.

A promising trend at the Federal level is the drive to support increased innovation in education. The Investing in Innovation Fund, which was established in 2009 under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, aims to do just that. The Fund provides competitive grants to local

educational agencies and nonprofit partners with proven track records of successfully improving educational outcomes.¹²⁶ The grant competition has already awarded \$800 million to innovative projects thought to be promising, with the goal of establishing a pipeline of innovative education projects that work. The so-called “i3 Fund” aims to serve as a way to vet ideas, so innovations that work can be replicated across the country.¹²⁷ Another Federal reform effort intended to encourage innovation is The National Education Technology plan. The Plan calls for greater use of technology in education to personalize the learning process for each student. It aims to provide teachers with new tools, and to utilize school and student data to improve student outcomes. An online learning registry will also be available to teachers so they can share lessons and content on how and what to teach.¹²⁸

In addition to stressing the importance of innovation, the Federal government has made progress toward revising and reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The ESEA reauthorization will focus on encouraging further innovation, raising standards, rewarding success, and allowing additional flexibility for states to invest in the areas where they believe resources can have the most significant impact. In addition, Our Piece of the Pie®, a youth development agency based in Hartford, CT, worked with U.S. Senator Blumenthal during the fall 2011 mark-up to ensure that struggling students will have a place in the reauthorized bill. In his final amendment to Title I of the ESEA, Senator Blumenthal included language specifically focused on supporting over-age, under-credited youth. The amendment adds two requirements under Title I. First, when eligible entities apply for a grant, they must submit a needs assessment including “the percent of students who are 2 or more years over-aged or under-credited for their grade level.” Second, entities receiving the grant must implement an early warning indicator system, analyzing academic indicators to determine, among other things, “which students are 2 or more years over-aged or under-credited for on-time secondary school graduation.”¹²⁹ This is a significant step that recognizes the critical importance of assisting this specific population in addressing the negative economic and social impacts of disengaged youth.¹³⁰

Despite these positive steps forward, federal law must begin to reflect even more support for our nation’s struggling youth. Without specific provisions, funding, or mandates, innovative practices that have proven effective will never have the chance to become widespread. Strategies like blended learning, extended day/year, and student-level data availability must be championed at the federal level, allowing states to follow suit and help to eliminate the population of over-age, under-credited youth.

Connecticut State Reform Efforts

While support for education reform at the federal level has been progressing slowly, progress at the state level has always moved at a faster pace. States such as Oklahoma, Massachusetts, Tennessee and Florida have all embraced some combination of innovative strategies, particularly aimed at struggling students. From support for alternative programs to studies on high school

dropouts, large-scale school turnaround plans to virtual schooling, these states have led the way for education reform across the country.¹³¹

Historically, Connecticut has not been among the states touted for education reform efforts, though not for a lack of need. Connecticut is widely known to be home to the worst achievement gap in the nation between low-income students and their non-low-income peers. Even Connecticut's low-income students are being outperformed by low-income students in neighboring states, countering the argument that this gap is simply caused by the state's exceedingly high achieving students. For example, in 2010, Massachusetts and Connecticut had nearly the same percentages of low-income students, 34.2% and 34.4%, respectively. However, while Massachusetts' low-income students placed 2nd in the nation (when comparing low-income students) on 4th grade math assessments, Connecticut's low-income students placed 48th. The difference in their performance equates to about 1.5 grade levels. These students are falling behind as early as 4th grade, and will likely continue to fall behind and disengage in school, becoming OU youth and possibly high school dropouts. Even for those who do graduate from high school, many will be unprepared to succeed in post-secondary education. In fact, just 36% of Connecticut high school graduates complete a 4-year college degree in 6 years, while it is estimated that 64% of Connecticut jobs will require a college degree by the year 2018.¹³²

Education reform is desperately needed in Connecticut to reverse the trajectory of struggling students and boost the state's economy in the long-term. With an estimated 30-40,000 OU youth, Connecticut cannot afford to stall. After tackling job creation during his first session, Governor Malloy posed similar arguments this year, declaring the 2012 legislative session "the year of education reform." He subsequently proposed a bill outlining specific reform strategies to get Connecticut back on the path to being a leader in education. Despite the short session and massive resistance from special interest groups, the legislature passed an education reform bill, which Governor Malloy signed into law during a ceremony at the capitol on May 15, 2012.¹³³ Key elements of the law include a reformed teacher tenure system, tied to teacher effectiveness in the classroom, as well as the implementation of a new teacher evaluation system, created by the state's Performance Evaluation Advisory Committee. The law also revises teacher development requirements, providing more personalized professional development opportunities, as well as increasing funding for public schools of choice. Less controversial elements of the legislation include 1,000 additional pre-school slots and the creation of new family resource centers and school-based health clinics in low-performing districts.¹³⁴

Though this education overhaul legislation is crucial to improve student success rates in secondary schools, post-secondary success is also important for the future of the state. Though Senate Bill 40 did not make the same foray into the public eye as the Governor's secondary education reform bill, it maintained a focus on a significant issue for the state: the negative effects of college remediation. As a student's chance of earning a post-secondary degree decreases with every remedial class that they must take, the Connecticut General Assembly eliminated them as an option. Senate Bill 40 requires colleges to embed remedial supports into

Connecticut's Year of Education Reform

After Governor Malloy announced that the 2012 legislative session would be “the year for education reform,” he proposed Senate Bill 24. This groundbreaking bill proposed significant changes to institutions like teacher tenure, and provided substantial support to improve student achievement across the state. After weeks of hearings and negotiations, Governor Malloy signed Public Act 12-78 on June 6, 2012. Though the final result has backed away from some of the Governor’s original proposed reforms, it represents a start to eradicating the status quo in Connecticut’s education system. The act brings many important changes to Connecticut, all aimed at improving the quality of public education. Some of the most controversial elements of the act center on teacher evaluations and the teacher tenure system. Beginning as a pilot program over the next two years, the legislation implements a new teacher evaluation process, using the framework created by Connecticut’s Performance Evaluation Advisory Council.¹³⁵ In addition, it calls for teacher tenure to be tied to effectiveness in the classroom, and adds “ineffectiveness” as one of the grounds for dismissal. The law also rewrites professional development requirements for teachers, replacing Continuing Education Units with personalized professional development opportunities on best practices to improve student achievement.¹³⁶ This new system will ensure that every classroom is led by a high quality and highly prepared instructor.

The act also seeks to improve the state’s lowest performing schools and districts. The centerpiece of this initiative is the Commissioner’s Network, a group of the state’s 25 lowest performing schools. Under the new law, these schools will be provided with state supports and interventions to improve their performance. Innovation is expected to drive improvement in these schools, and they will be restructured to increase learning time, and to include a community schools approach to education. This approach will provide the comprehensive support students need in order to succeed both inside, and outside of the classroom.¹³⁷ The law also creates the Alliance Districts, a group of the state’s 30 lowest performing districts. These districts are slated to receive added education funding, conditional on the approval of a district-wide reform plan to improve student achievement. These approaches are intended to improve the state’s worst-performing schools, giving their students a better chance at secondary and post-secondary success.

A final critical piece of Connecticut’s education reform legislation is the increased support for public schools of choice. These schools often offer the most innovative and effective solutions, but are currently not seen as “public schools” in many ways, so they lack the support received by their traditional school counterparts. PA 12-78 begins to level the playing field by providing innovative schools of choice with much-needed increased funding.¹³⁸ It also specifically calls for choice schools to serve students from high need populations, including students with a history of low academic performance, even permitting schools targeting certain student groups to bypass the district-wide lottery process.¹³⁹ These changes will help to ensure that high need students, such as OU youth, can access the innovative learning environments they need, at schools with the resources necessary to provide these services.

If we are to positively impact OU youth in Connecticut, innovation in education must be supported. Governor Malloy’s bill was an ambitious effort to infuse innovation into schools and improve outcomes for all of Connecticut’s students, including OU youth. The future of education in Connecticut relies on these types of reforms, and PA 12-78 goes a long way toward accomplishing them.

entry-level courses for which students receive credits, instead of forcing students into remedial classes where no credit is available. Under this bill, colleges are required to do away with remedial courses entirely by 2014. By 2016, colleges must partner with Connecticut high schools to develop curriculum that aligns with post-secondary work and ensures that students are well prepared for the academic rigors of college. This bill is especially critical in light of a recent reduction in the amount of time a student can use federal Pell Grants. S.B. 40 ensures that students will not waste time and money in remedial classes while jeopardizing the long-term funding of their education.¹⁴⁰

While these key pieces of legislation have made important strides, further education reform efforts are necessary to ensure that Connecticut's struggling students will succeed. The innovation space afforded to Commissioner's Network schools must be extended statewide, giving all schools and districts the opportunity to implement strategies such as extended learning time. In addition, all public school models must be funded equitably, giving all of our state's students a fair shot at secondary school success; this means incorporating public schools of choice into the general education funding formula. Further, Connecticut should consider conversion to a student-based budgeting system, allowing each student's funding allotment to follow them to any public school. Over-age, under-credited students should also receive a recuperative weight, providing supplementary funding to accommodate their additional needs, as is the practice for special education or ELL students. These additional reforms are just a start, but will give Connecticut's schools and students the boost they need to improve achievement.

The Conclusion

The nation's education system, as it currently stands, has failed many of its students. The traditional "one size fits all" approach to public education has led to student disconnection and disengagement, resulting in an overwhelming dropout rate across the country. Over-age, under-credited students, in particular, tell a large part of the national dropout crisis story, and must be acknowledged as a key population on which to focus supports and interventions. These students can be put back on the path to success, but require specific strategies and innovative techniques to overcome the obstacles that they face.

States must consider creating innovation space to give schools the flexibility needed to implement such techniques. This will allow for the use of proven strategies, like blended learning environments and extended learning time, to support the country's struggling students. States must support innovative school models, often found in charter and contract schools, which have proven to work for students who cannot succeed in a traditional school setting. In addition, credit flexibility, like that established in New Hampshire, must be considered, to give schools the opportunity to introduce competency-based instructional plans. These strategies, among others, will give OU students widespread access to programs that will get them back on track to earning a high school diploma.

In addition, states must provide the appropriate policy supports to ensure that the strategies cultivated within the innovation space will succeed and advance. Adequate and equitable funding will ensure that alternative schools and programs have the resources necessary to help struggling students. Statewide post-secondary readiness mandates will ensure that *all* students are ready for success beyond high school. Finally, the creation of statewide early warning systems, like Colorado's SchoolView, will prevent students from falling behind, and eliminate the future population of OU youth.

By supporting alternative education programs and strategies that work, OU youth will receive the help they need to get back on track. This initiative is crucial to the future health of our communities, states, and nation, as each high school dropout costs nearly \$300,000 on the national average. We must ensure that these young people are not forgotten, but that they are a central consideration of national, state, and local reform efforts. With the proper supports, these students can, and will, succeed.

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About Our Piece of the Pie®, Inc.

Our Piece of the Pie®, Inc. (OPP®) is a youth development agency based in Hartford, CT. Focused on the mission of “helping urban youth become successful adults,” OPP has successfully structured its programs and services to lead at-risk or disadvantaged youth, ages 14-24, toward success in both community- and school-based settings. The agency’s signature program, Pathways to Success, integrates best practices from three fields – youth development, education, and workforce development – and helps young people to get through high school, and on to post-secondary education and meaningful employment. OPP has successfully served youth through our Pathways to Success program since 2005. We opened our partnership high school with Hartford Public Schools, Opportunity High School, in August 2009, serving only over-age, under-credited youth. More recently, OPP has engaged in policy efforts on behalf of our target population, working with state and federal policymakers to ensure that over-age, under-credited youth have the supports that they need to achieve success.

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