

Don't Cut Basic Skills and Job Experience Programs

Even before the tsunami of the Great Recession hit New York City, the number of black men out of a job was staggering. The unemployment rate now for black males hovers around 20 percent, but the actual jobless rate is much higher because, perversely, people who have given up looking for a job are not counted as “unemployed” by the government.

The greatest insulator against the effects of a recession in New York is the acquisition of basic skills. Those without high school diplomas or GEDs are by far the first to lose their jobs and the last to regain them because they have little to offer employers.

For years, the dropout rate for city high school students was epidemic, and even with the increase in graduation rates over the last four years, the state Education Department determined that less than 54 percent of the city's black students in the class of 2009 graduated in four years.

Disconnected Youth

What happens to the thousands of black youth who do not graduate? Many end up without skills and without a job. They are “disconnected” from any institution that might help them toward a successful future in life.

Research by the Community Service Society shows that out of a total of 160,000 16 to 24 year olds who are out of school and out of work, about 35 percent are African American. The number of males and females is nearly equal but, when we do not count young mothers, there are nearly three times as many young men than women who are disconnected. The question is how to address the needs of these disconnected youth who have no real opportunities in the work/school markets.

They are at great risk of becoming permanently disengaged from the labor market, threatening their ability to break out of the cycle of poverty and contribute to our economy and communities. Their idleness represents a great waste of resources and human potential for the city.

Disconnected youth are highly concentrated in the city, especially in the South Bronx and Central Brooklyn. These are the same neighborhoods where schools are weak and jobs are scarce — where many young people need a second chance to succeed but did not get a good first chance to begin with.

This is a national problem. There are more than four million disconnected youth in the United States – more than 80,000 in Chicago, over 90,000 in Los Angeles. CSS has launched a nationwide initiative to highlight this issue, identify program models, and shape a public debate about solutions.

Along with the lack of basic skills, the biggest barrier that people of color face is lack of job experience. Public programs that provide work experience to youth and adults are key to helping individuals overcome this barrier.

What Can Be Done

The federal government should be expanding the workforce development system that focuses on out-of-school youth – current Workforce Investment Act (WIA) programming does not target this population. As a result too many funds end up in in-school youth programs. The Youth Opportunity grant program should be restored. The original WIA included a program that targeted funding to communities with high rates of 16-24 year-olds who were out of school, out of work, and with low skills. Despite strong successes in high poverty areas with high concentrations of people of color, such as Baltimore, the Bush administration quickly defunded the Youth Opportunity program.

The state, in the midst of a record budget crunch, is not helping. The state Education Department has proposed a budget that would eliminate \$1.15 million of funding to external organizations that serve as GED test sites. This cut would significantly reduce the number of test seats offered in New York City. In addition, the governor has proposed cutting \$2.6 million from Adult Literacy Education. This would drastically reduce the number of GED prep programs in community colleges and community-based organizations.

Cutting less than \$4 million to help close a budget gap of \$9 billion seems like a false economy considering that these programs are an important investment in our short- and long-term economic future. Research by the Community Service Society has shown that basic skills and the GED are the biggest predictors of employment security in the current economy, and represent a major fiscal benefit to New York State over the long term. Given our currently dismal GED outcomes – New York State ranks 50th out of 50 in GED passage rate nationwide – now is not the time to be cutting resources to these programs.

Even more recently, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced his Executive Budget, which included a cut of approximately \$5 million to adult literacy, virtually eliminating the city's contribution to help immigrants and native born individuals who need literacy and language skills, or assistance in preparing for the GED. It is upsetting to see that the mayor does not understand the value of these programs.

Black male unemployment begins with a lack of basic skills. Although they are no longer in school, disconnected youth should be able to get skills training to attain a GED. The GED will help getting and holding a job as well as having a positive effect on earnings.

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