

**Testimony to the New York Education Reform Commission  
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**The Educational Pipeline & Workforce Development for Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and Whites**

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A recent report entitled *Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth* (June 2012) by the White House Council for Community Solutions estimated that “6.7 million 16 to 24 year olds (roughly one in six in this age group)” are not at school or employed. The Council sees these young people as opportunity youth. In her letter to President Barak Obama, the Chair of the council states that “when lost revenue and direct costs for social supports are factored in, taxpayers will shoulder roughly \$1.6 trillion over the lifetimes of these young people.”

New York State and New York City similarly face a challenge and an opportunity.

In New York State, the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy reported<sup>1</sup> that:

- In 2009, close to 200,000 youth, ages 16-24, were out of school and not worked in at least one year.
- One third of disconnected youth are white, the largest single ethnic group.
- “Six in ten disconnected youth are African-American or Hispanic, compared to only one in three non-disconnected youth.”

In New York City, The Community Service Society reported<sup>2</sup> that:

- “Latinos have the lowest school enrollment rates and educational attainment of any racial or ethnic group in New York City.”
- “A greater percentage of Latino youth live in poor and near-poor households than any other racial group.”
- “Puerto Ricans, particularly males, emerge as the most disadvantaged youth group in New York City, with rates of school enrollment, educational attainment, and employment lower than any other comparable group, including young black males.”

Like many of you here today, we at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, are concerned about the growing numbers of out of school and work youth—especially those of Puerto Rican and Latino descent. The reality is that the current economic climate will likely only contribute to the growth of this very

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<sup>1</sup> Back on Track: Re-Connecting New York’s Disconnected Youth to Education and Employment, June 2009

<sup>2</sup> Latino Youth in New York City: School, Work, and Income Trends for New York’s Largest Group of Young People, Policy Brief, October 2010.

vulnerable population. Such growth is cause for concern as studies continue to show that out of work and school youth are more likely to experience difficult transitions to and negative outcomes in adulthood including: persistent poverty, long term unemployment, poor mental and physical health, substance abuse and dependency, homelessness and violence.

Educational attainment is a key variable when understanding the prospects for youth not in school and not employed.

Puerto Rican and Latino youth in New York City and New York State face disparities in school and college enrollment compared to Whites. Among 18-24-year olds not at school and not at work, the so called “disconnected youth”, Puerto Ricans have a disproportionate proportion of youth --52%-- who are high school dropouts. In comparison, 36% of other Latinos and 16% of whites of disconnected youth have not completed high school.

There are other important differences in the school enrollment and employment profile of these groups. As the graphic indicates, whites who are at work and not at school have overwhelmingly (57.9%) completed their bachelor’s degree. Those who are at school and not working are overwhelmingly (58.5%) completing their degree in college. This traditional “model” of educational attainment and work does not apply to Puerto Ricans and other Latinos. Only 10.7% of Puerto Ricans and 5.3% of other Latinos who work and are not at school have completed their bachelor’s degree. The largest proportion of other Latinos at work and not at school were completing their college degree (52.3%), and for Puerto Ricans the largest proportion are high school graduates not in college (37.7%). About two thirds Puerto Ricans and one third of other Latinos enter the labor force without ever attending college.

Such disparities in school enrollment, educational attainment and workforce participation are critical when designing programs to serve youth not in school or work. The traditional “model” simply does not apply to Puerto Ricans and other Latinos. The work force participation and school enrollment profile of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos point to the need for educational programs that incorporate workforce development principles especially designed to serve populations with a non-traditional profile transitioning from school to work.

Centro recently conducted several studies on how to support the transition of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos workers’ out of unemployment and low-wage jobs.<sup>3</sup> We identified many exemplary pathways programs in four key targeted industries: Health services, Green jobs, Education and Social work. These are especially important industries because of both the generation of new jobs and the potential for programs to be linked to degree granting higher education institutions.

One of the core findings from the studies is that the publicly financed workforce-investment system and workforce intermediaries play a unique role in connecting employers and workers, providing skills training and the supports necessary to gain and sustain employment. However, we found significant disparities on how the Puerto Rican population is serviced, as well as little or no participation of Puerto

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<sup>3</sup> Pathways to Economic Opportunities, Centro Journal, 23:11 (Fall 2011), Edwin Melendez, Guest editor.

Rican community-based organizations in the workforce-development system in New York City and in other areas of greatest concentration of Puerto Ricans.

The findings from the study call for the need to strengthen and develop programs that focus explicitly on serving the Puerto Rican and Latino communities. We examined pathways programs that filled the gap in services provided by the publicly financed workforce-investment system.

Pathways programs combine GED preparation and college readiness with workforce preparation targeting skills demanded by employers in growing industries. In particular, these programs target entry-level employment with minimal credentials and paying above the minimum wage while offering the potential for career advancement. Examples of these sectors include the emerging energy-efficiency and retrofitting industry, early education, community health and social services, and others.

Common features of best practice programs targeting disconnected youth include tuition and academic support services, transportation and child care assistance, English as a Second Language, and access to employers' recruitment networks. Invariably these programs involve partnerships between community service providers and colleges and universities. Community partners provide the links to disadvantaged youth and support services, while colleges provide skills training and academic and financial support.

The challenge now is for leaders in K-12 education, higher education, government, and community organizations to engage with employers and industry leaders in addressing the unique needs of Puerto Rican and other Latino youth.