

## Durham Connected by 25 Concept Paper

September 16, 2009

### I. INTRODUCTION

One in ten American youth ages 16 to 24 is disconnected from the conventional paths of education, work and civic engagement that lead to productive adulthood. These youth are not in school or lacking a high school degree, not working or in the legitimate labor market, involved with the criminal justice system or facing significant domestic issues. In Durham, North Carolina, the numbers are even more dramatic, a situation that a recent study called “an ominous problem hidden in plain sight.” Recent research shows that an estimated 3,672 young people, more than 10 percent of the population between 16 and 24, are already disconnected, with many more at risk of becoming so. The implications of this “ominous problem” have led concerned citizens to come together to form Durham Connected by 25, a collaborative aimed at implementing evidence-based initiatives to close the gaps in Durham’s network of programs and services for youth. The group aspires to help Durham become a community where multiple pathways enable all youth to graduate high school college-ready and earn a post-secondary credential by age 25. Specifically, Durham Connected by 25 hopes to stem the disconnection of almost 500 high school dropouts every year and reconnect youth to education and the workforce by:

- developing systemic solutions to policy and programmatic weaknesses,
- creating multiple pathways to high school graduation and higher education,
- supporting youth in transition from criminal justice, and
- strengthening workforce opportunities for youth.

### II. PURPOSE

Though the majority of American youth transition to adulthood successfully, almost 2.8 million—nearly 10 percent of young people ages 16 to 24—are neither working nor in school, placing them at risk of economic and social hardship throughout their lives.<sup>i</sup> Disproportionately high numbers of low-income youth and youth of color are disconnected in the South, a problem that is acute in Durham. Though the Durham Metropolitan Statistical Area<sup>ii</sup> has the second-highest number of professional, scientific, and technical employees per 1,000 residents in the Southeast, such employment is not available to our youth because of limited work experience and education. Between 2005 and 2007, 17 percent of youth ages 16-24 who were not in school were unemployed in Durham, a high proportion.<sup>iii</sup> In the current recession, when 60 percent of jobs lost over the last year were held by someone under age 25,<sup>iv</sup> these numbers can only have become worse. Durham County high schools graduate only 63 percent of all students; only 57.7 percent of African Americans and 37.4 percent of Hispanics graduate in four years,<sup>v</sup> leaving too many consigned to a life without possibilities. Our systems for reconnecting older youth, moreover, are overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem: unlike the Triangle region, there are more disconnected youth aged 20-24 than 15-19 in Durham. Unless the problem of disconnected youth in our community is addressed systematically, Durham’s high youth poverty and violent crime rates will continue to climb. A combination of public neglect and inadequate policy relegates many youth to premature and unnecessary failure, dividing the Durham community and limiting its economic potential. Policy and program reforms to address the problem are well within our reach.

The challenge of reconnecting youth is not the responsibility of any one organization. Many organizations sensing the urgency of the situation have developed programs to support our community’s youth; however, most programs are small and lack resources to address the magnitude of the problem. Durham must better coordinate these efforts and pursue a more systematic approach to strengthening youth support. Durham Connected by 25, a collaborative of concerned citizens from multiple sectors in Durham, was convened in

2008 in response to MDC's report *Disconnected Youth in the Research Triangle Region* (<http://www.mdcinc.org/docs/disconnected-youth.pdf>), which documents the extent of the problem. Durham Connected by 25 is working to coordinate the youth agenda in Durham and close the policy and program gaps that allow 500 more youth to slip out of our public schools every year, many of whom are unable to reconnect to other programs. The group is dedicated to implementing research-driven initiatives which have proven successful in other communities, and to giving young people most at risk the resources that they need to make the successful transition to education, work, and civic engagement by age 25. Since the challenges of older youth invariably start earlier in their lives, the group also champions continuous support beginning in childhood.

### **III. PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

Durham Connected by 25 is engaging the community in an inclusive process to create pilot programs and support systemic reforms that will lead to postsecondary education and work success. These efforts include K-12 improvements as well as community college, workforce, and community support programs in Durham County—and later in the Triangle— that will remove barriers that prevent youth from being successful in school and in the job market. The overarching goal of the initiative is to connect all youth to high school credentials, post-secondary education, and meaningful work by the age of 25.

#### *Objectives*

Durham Connected by 25's objectives include:

1. Addressing the program and policy weaknesses in Durham's current systems that result in over 500 high-school-age youth becoming disconnected from education every year.
2. Developing multiple pathways to high school and postsecondary graduation. This includes forging new connections between secondary schools and community colleges that reclaim dropouts and enable them to complete their high school degree while earning community college credit, as well as establishing other community-wide policies and programs that connect all youth to high school and postsecondary credentials.
3. Strengthening workforce exposure and connections for youth and young adults.

#### *Methodology and Timeline*

Durham Connected by 25 will accomplish these goals by doing the following:

1. *Data Analysis:* The group is engaged in data analysis that will identify the factors that lead to disconnection from education and the workforce and help education leaders and policymakers understand which youth are at highest risk of dropping out. Data have been presented to the group by the Superintendent of Durham Public Schools, the President of Durham Technical Community College, the head of the Durham Office of Economic and Workforce Development, and the Chief District Court Judge. These presentations will be followed by additional analysis allowing Durham to identify and create multiple pathways to graduation and the necessary policy changes.
2. *Creating Education Pathways:* Options for allowing youth to complete high school degrees and earn college credit simultaneously are already being explored. Representatives from DPS and DTCC have begun discussions which may lead to Durham's implementation of the national Gateway to College program, which places students who have dropped out of school or are not on track to graduate in a community college to complete high school and associate degree credits. The first cohort of students would begin in the fall of 2010.
3. *Increasing Workforce Development:* While more than 500 youth become disconnected from school every year, only a fraction of them are placed in jobs through Durham's Economic and Workforce

Development programs. Over the next year, Connected by 25 will work with local businesses including the Duke University Health System, Durham’s largest employer, to find placements for these and other disconnected youth.

### *Anticipated Outcomes*

Durham Connected by 25 is committed to build a stronger network of community-wide programs and services directed at youth and to establish a standard practice of linking research to the development of new programs and services. Ultimately, Connected by 25 aspires to raise high school persistence and graduation rates, improve post-secondary access and completion, and increase entry to living wage employment for all Durham youth.

Our anticipated outcomes over the next year include:

1. The entire Durham community is engaged in an alliance to support youth.
2. Creating a lasting leadership structure of high-level system heads and community volunteers who will advocate reform and hold the community accountable for results.
3. Using data to develop or improve two to three systemic and scalable youth connection initiatives involving public schools, high school and community college partnerships, and workforce development.
4. Policy change at the institutional and community level to support reconnection and advance the development of multiple pathways to graduation from high school and college.
5. Local philanthropy will have increased its support for youth reconnection activities.
6. Durham's example will have spurred similar interest and activity in other Triangle jurisdictions.

Our benchmarks for these outcomes will be:

1. Durham residents and neighborhoods are included in a process of shaping initiatives for youth.
2. The leadership council—including Durham’s elected and appointed officials with authority over public education, community college programs, workforce development, youth employment, youth services, and the community itself—is formed and meets regularly.
3. Pilot programs such as Gateway to College will be in place or moving toward implementation.
4. Policy and program inventories are in progress, and a change agenda has been developed.
5. New sources of philanthropic support have been identified, and proposals are in progress.
6. Other Triangle jurisdictions request information about Durham’s activities to reconnect youth.

## **IV. MORE INFORMATION**

For more information about Durham Connected by 25, please contact:

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<sup>i</sup> MDC, Inc. “Disconnected Youth in the research Triangle Region: An Ominous Problem Hidden in Plain Sight.” GlaxoSmithKline, 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> Comprised of Durham, Orange, Chatham, and Person counties. Washington, DC, has more of this category of job per 1,000 residents.

<sup>iii</sup> US Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey. In Wake County, unemployment among this age group was 11 percent.

<sup>iv</sup> Center for Labor Market Studies. “Out with the Young and In With the Old: US Labor Markets 2000-2008 and the Case for an Immediate Jobs Creation Program for Teens and Young Adults.” Northeastern University, 2009. Available at: <http://www.clms.neu.edu/publication/>

<sup>v</sup> US Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey. Data on educational attainment. Available at <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>.