



## **Disconnected Youth**

An interview with David Dodson, president, MDC Inc.

*Q. Define what you mean by “disconnected youth.”*

A. By disconnected youth we mean young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school or employed in the legitimate workforce. They may have had experience with the criminal justice system or have been in foster care. They aren't getting the education, work, civic, and family support they need to be successful adults.

*Q. How did you become immersed in this issue?*

A. The GlaxoSmithKline Foundation gave MDC a grant to explore the problem and to analyze the situation specifically in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina. From September 2006 through March 2007, we analyzed data, conducted community interviews and surveys, and had conversations with leaders in government, industry, and the nonprofit sector.

*Q. What is the scope of the problem?*

A. First, we learned that this issue is being rediscovered by a group of foundations and researchers. Michael Wald, one of the leading national authorities on legal policy towards children, points out that there are approximately 11 million of these young people, and the largest proportion exists in the South. If you look at the single major foundation effort to address disconnected youth – the Youth Transition Funders Group – you'll see that they are not working in communities in the South where the biggest problem exists.

We also learned that in the Research Triangle there is a lot of conversation about gangs and the pathology of young people not performing well in school but there's no discussion of disconnection. No one is examining why these kids are disconnected and in trouble.

*Q. What are some of your findings thus far? Why are these kids disconnected?*

A. We found that North Carolina's education policies have created troubling systems failures. For example, in North Carolina, it's legal to leave school at 16. If you leave school at 16 having performed academically below grade level, it's difficult to get the remedial education you need to move forward. To get into a GED program, you need 9<sup>th</sup> grade competency. To get into adult high school you have to be 18 years old. As a result, there is often a gap between 16 and 18 when kids who have dropped out have few, if any, options. And there are a significant number of youth who, at 16, are functioning at third and fourth grade levels. These kids tend to give up. They have no recourse but to fall back on gangs or the few community programs that do exist.

In the Triangle area, one individual interviewed told us that between 500 and 700 young people annually leave or are pushed out of the public schools, many of whom have no ability to get into a GED program. If you combine the end of compulsory schooling and large numbers of low-performing young people with an absence of community alternatives, then these young people are at risk of falling into antisocial gang behavior.

Further, we found that in Durham and Orange counties, there are no effective alternative high schools for kids who can't make it in a conventional environment. I'm talking about schools that teach differently or are structured differently to help these kids. Raleigh has four alternative middle- and high schools but no county in the Triangle area has a vigorous system of high school alternatives for these kids. Low performance plus an absence of alternatives leads to kids being educationally disconnected.

*Q Are there any job possibilities for disconnected youth?*

A. There is no county in the Triangle that has any formal system to prepare young people for work. Durham and Wake County each offer only about 100 summer youth jobs, and those jobs likely are not going to disconnected youth. No one has paid attention to the youth unemployment problem – only the dropout problem. We found a few programs in which they're teaching young people to write a resume, but what good is a resume if there are no employers at the other end to read it?

The sad fact is that a 16 year old dropping out of high school and wanting to work has no options. A knowledge economy rewards education, and we are turning out young people who are not contributing to their future or ours.

*Q. What happens, then, to disconnected youth once they leave school?*

A. As I mentioned earlier, many of them get into gangs and into trouble. Then the criminal justice system is the default solution to the problem. Lock them up. But if you want educated, employable, active citizens, then you have to raise young people well. From a healthy youth perspective, there is nothing in the Triangle that is set up to foster healthy youth.

*Q. Then what should we be doing to help these young people?*

A. The first thing is to get systems – criminal justice, job training, mental health, schools – to work together and ask what are we doing and not doing to address this problem. In Boston, Philadelphia, and other cities, Youth Transitions is creating a leadership structure that is aligning resources and leadership so that youth become a conscious part of what agencies do. There is a need for alternative high schools. The kids who leave school at 16 should not fall off the cliff. There needs to be a way to connect them and to have alternatives to incarceration.

Small scale and valiant programs like the Boys and Girls Clubs can't take care of the system's failure. The answer is not more programs; it's structuring systems and policies that don't create holes through which young people are falling. In our research, we saw a number of small programs but not much connection among them.

We need to get leaders to pay attention. One recommendation is to host a symposium so that business, government, nonprofit, and youth leaders can sit down and talk about the reality. Business and government could begin to think differently about employing young people – with apprenticeships, job shadowing programs, subsidized employment – all leading to real-wage employment so that there's a developmental continuum that moves young people into work in a conventional setting.

The stark reality is that we need these young people to support us in future and currently, they're not equipped to do this. We're not taking a chance on them. If we're not teaching them to be employable, they won't be. Putting up bars or putting them behind bars is not the solution.