External, societal factors such as community resources, organizations, and public policies can also be instrumental in maintaining engagement or leading to youth disconnection. Such external supports are especially critical at key transition points, such as when youth transition from middle to high school, graduate from high school, age out of foster care, or exit the justice system. Ensuring alignment of systems and support structures related to education and employment is imperative to keep youth connected to school and work. As both education and employment are social determinants of health, preventing disconnection through systems alignment will safeguard youth as they navigate their academic, professional, and personal futures.

**Invest in Well-Aligned Systems**

Many existing policies and programs aim to address these inflection points, and some — such as the Every Student Succeeds Act — are successful in this approach but would benefit from more investment. Through ESSA, the federal government can support youth transitions from high school to higher education through funding of evidence-based programs such as Dual Enrollment and Early College High Schools, both of which overwhelmingly benefit underrepresented students. [52,53]
Both Dual Enrollment and Early College High Schools allow students to earn college credit while still in high school, and participation in either makes students more likely to graduate high school, immediately enroll in college, and complete their degree than peers in traditional high school programs. The reach, however, is limited: out of more than 23,000 public secondary schools in the United States, only 300 serve as Early College High Schools. [54,55] And while 82% of U.S. public schools offer dual enrollment, low-income families pay out of pocket in approximately 45% of programs. [56,57]

Whereas ESSA supports the transition from high school to higher education, legislation such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act facilitates critical connections between education and career for those most at risk of disconnection. WIOA funds a broad range of career development initiatives designed to support youth re-engagement, including job readiness programs like Job Corps and YouthBuild — both of which provide low-income youth 16–24 years of age with training, education, and employment support — as well as federal career and technical education programs that help states create connections between high school and postsecondary education and employers. [58] Perkins V, which is designed to increase employment opportunities for chronically unemployed or underemployed populations, provides additional support for incarcerated youth and those transitioning out of foster care, two groups disproportionately at risk of disconnection from both school and the workforce.

Although both WIOA and Perkins V have the potential to serve a significant number of opportunity youth, federal funding for critical workforce programming has decreased by nearly 20% over the past decade while unemployment has fallen by less than 7%. [59,60] Similarly situated programs such as the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood — which provides both education and workforce funding for youth transitioning out of foster care — have seen funding levels increase in response to the COVID-19 pandemic after decades of stagnation, but most provisions are effective only until the end of FY21. [61] Strengthening education, workforce, and national service pathways to meet current need — with an expanded commitment to engaging low-income community residents as service givers, not just service receivers — would improve the prospects for opportunity youth by providing an invitation to directly address systemic issues behind disconnection, expanding pathways to relevant and meaningful work, and treating them with full respect for their intelligence, value, and potential.
Amend Programs to Improve Alignment

Other policies and programs, including Pell Grants, require fine-tuning to actualize intentions. Financial burden is one of the primary barriers opportunity youth face in the pursuit of postsecondary training and education. Student debt is highest — and hardest to overcome — for students of color: in comparison with 66% of their White peers, 90% of Black students and 72% of Latinx students take out loans for higher education, and while on average White borrowers have paid off almost 95% of their loans two decades after graduation, Black students on average still owe 95% of their initial balance at that point in time. The Pell Grant, which provides low- and moderate-income students with direct assistance for postsecondary studies based on financial need, is well situated to alleviate the debt burden for those students most at risk of disconnection.

Unfortunately, the maximum value of the Pell Grant has declined significantly relative to the cost of college, and program eligibility has failed to keep up with changing demands of the workforce, continuing to fund only two- and four-year postsecondary programs at the exclusion of high-quality job training programs that can place participants in high-paying jobs with a low debt burden. In addition, undocumented youth — including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals students — remain ineligible for student loans, work-study, and grants under Title IV. Strengthening the Pell Grant program to equitably meet the needs of low-income families and youth is essential and expanding its applicability to include job training programs would serve to increase economic stability for youth while simultaneously helping to address a growing skilled trades labor shortage that predates the pandemic.

Federal Registered Apprenticeships can also bridge the gap between education and employment by placing participants in paid positions that offer on-the-job training, guaranteed wage increases aligned with skill development, industry-recognized credentials, and a path to future employment. Despite these promises, only 250,000 youth enrolled in Registered Apprenticeships in 2019, as compared with the more than 2 million youth who enrolled in community colleges nationwide. One factor related to poor enrollment is the disconnection between apprenticeship programs and the higher education system, which leaves participants with highly developed technical skills but not the associate’s or bachelor’s degree necessary to advance in their field. Formal connections between apprenticeships and academic institutions — whether through the creation of “student-apprentice” positions or place-based initiatives — would reduce barriers to enrollment and increase incentives, preventing youth disconnection and potentially facilitating reengagement.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Existing policies and programs situated to support youth at critical transition points could better support disconnected youth with stronger investment and alignment.

Congress can...

- Fully fund ESSA programs that are proven to support youth connections to and success in postsecondary education, including Dual Enrollment and Early College High School.

- Maintain pandemic-era expansions to foster care support funds introduced in the Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act.

- Require colleges to accept multiple forms of documentation for a disability, including an IEP, 504 Plan, or prior evaluation, and fund The National Center for College Students with Disabilities to provide training and resources on services, supports, and accommodations for students with disabilities.

- Fully fund ESSA programs that are proven to support youth connections to and success in higher education, including Dual Enrollment and Early College High School.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Congress can...

- Strengthen the Pell Grant Program by:
  - Increasing the maximum Pell Grant Award;
  - Amending the legislation to annually adjust Pell Grants for inflation;
  - Ensuring that the entirety of Pell Grant funding is made “mandatory” in the annual appropriations process; and
  - Expanding the range of programs covered by Pell Grants to include short-term credentials and other workforce programming offered by institutions of higher education, and expand eligibility to undocumented immigrant youth who are ineligible for DACA.

- Create additional federally subsidized employment opportunities for youth with barriers to employment, including homelessness, and allocate funding for locally run essential services for participants in youth employment programs.

- Strengthen investments in existing, evidence-based federal programs for young people, such as Job Corps, YouthBuild, AmeriCorps, WIOA Title I Youth Activities and Title II Adult Secondary Education Programs, the Reentry Employment Opportunities Program, and the Chafee Education and Training Vouchers Program.

- Fund a new round of grants through the Juvenile Justice Reentry Education Program in the Department of Education Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education and direct states to maximize set-asides for incarcerated youth under Perkins V.
**RECOMMENDATIONS**

*Congress can...*

- Establish a 21st Century Civilian Climate Corps prioritizing the engagement of youth who are recent veterans, Native, and low-income.

- Expand pathways to high-quality, well-paying apprenticeships by:
  - Extending the Federal Work-Study Program to cover tuition and fees for students enrolled in degree apprenticeship programs;
  - Incentivizing the establishment of pre-apprenticeships linked directly to registered apprenticeships with career advancement supports and direct entry agreements for graduates to enter two- or four-year institutions; and
  - Establishing a federal loan program for employers interested in developing new apprenticeship programs.

- Expand eligibility of large-scale federal employment initiatives to include undocumented immigrant youth and young people with DACA, temporary protected, refugee, or asylee status and allow for additional flexibility at the state and tribal levels to match requirements to specific populations.

- Expand and increase funding for existing Native workforce development programs and establish a new Indian Youth Corps program.

- Create a new funding stream for organizing low-income youth to create and implement community improvement projects of their own design to address local concerns.
REFERENCES

[61] Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act (Division X of P.L. 116-260).