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## Editors' Notes

THE TRANSITION OF YOUTH from adolescence to early adulthood has historically been marked by graduation from high school, followed by decisions to pursue higher education or vocational training, or move directly into the labor market or military—all with the goal of becoming economically self-sufficient. Today, however, there is growing concern that for large numbers of older youth, particularly low-income youth of color, these milestones are becoming increasingly difficult to achieve. Furthermore, as a society, we are not offering young people ages fourteen and older the supports and opportunities they need to acquire the knowledge, skills, and practical experiences to make this transition successfully. Public high schools often fail to engage their students, and a high percentage of youth, especially black and Hispanic youth, drop out of school early or fail to earn their high school diplomas. At the same time, members of the business community report that an alarming number of students who do graduate lack the basic skills required in the workplace.

Over the past forty years, there have been significant investments, both public and private, in programs that seek to improve outcomes for children. The 1965 launch and subsequent growth of the Head Start program and the more recent expansion of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers were significant victories for the advocates of low-income children and families. However, most of these new investments focused on the needs of young children. There are few policy initiatives that focus on or acknowledge the needs of older youth or offer the resources to better prepare

young people for the challenges of early adulthood before they age out of the educational system.

In order to see improved outcomes for older youth, particularly low-income youth of color, we need to focus our attention on their needs now. For these young people, the clock is ticking; they deserve a better chance to succeed. To better serve their needs, we need a shared knowledge and understanding of what their developmental needs are and the challenges they face in meeting these needs in today's world.

We need to improve both in-school and out-of-school experiences to make learning more engaging and relevant to youths' lives. We need to also promote both expansion of and innovation in out-of-school-time programs so we can attract and engage more youth in developing their interests and skills that will be relevant to them after high school. This cannot happen without policies that call for increased funding and technical assistance to high schools and community programs that serve older youth, better coordination and collaboration at the systems levels, and the reform of policies that impede rather than support efforts to better prepare youth for transition to adulthood.

We hope this issue of *New Directions for Youth Development* will bring increased focus on the needs of older youth and offer ideas and working models for how we can better prepare them for the road ahead.

In Chapter One, Nicole Zarrett and Jacquelynne Eccles explain the major developmental changes and challenges associated with late adolescence. They point to the critical importance of understanding the supports older youth need to stay on healthy, positive trajectories. By blending developmental theory and youth development research findings, the authors provide valuable insight into the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

In Chapter Two, Marion Goldstein and Pedro Noguera review the challenges and hardships faced by low-income urban youth of color that place them at risk and shape their lives and the opportunities available to them. While prevention programs present one strategy to help urban youth avoid the risk of substance abuse, most are ineffective because they are not tailored to meet the cultural sensibilities of diverse adolescent populations. Goldstein and

Noguera present an alternative strategy relevant to any program serving this population—one that places diversity with respect to culture, class, and environment at the center of program efforts.

In Chapter Three, Georgia Hall discusses the urgency of integrating technology skill building into youth development experiences. The chapter outlines race, gender, and socioeconomic differences among teens in technology access and utilization and ends with recommended approaches for ensuring that all teens have access to the knowledge and skills needed to meet the demands of the twenty-first century.

The next two chapters focus on school-based initiatives and the potential of school reform and high school after-school programs to promote youth engagement and support school success. In Chapter Four, James Connell and Adena Klem describe the Institute for Research and Reform in Education's development of First Things First (FTF), a school reform framework grounded in youth development research. Independent evaluation has confirmed that the use of the framework in schools serving large numbers of minority and economically disadvantaged students is associated with higher persistence and graduation rates and better performance on state tests. The authors stress the need for adults in schools to build better relationships with students and employ strategies to increase the personalization of their education. They detail four critical features within the FTF framework that are focused on students and discuss three specific strategies for achieving these features in schools.

In Chapter Five, Sarah Barr, Jennifer Birmingham, Jennifer Fornal, Rachel Klein, and Sam Piha review the insights and lessons learned from three after-school initiatives: the After School Safety and Education for Teens, After School Matters, and the After-School Corporation. Although each of these programs has a different structure, all have shown success in attracting high school students to their programs and engaging them in meaningful activities to support their success in school and transition to early adulthood. The chapter ends with recommendations for policymakers and funders related to funding, accountability, program quality, and diverse learning opportunities.

Chapter Six, by Joan Arches and Jennie Fleming, presents two case studies of youth projects in the United Kingdom and United

States that demonstrate the use of social action as a viable program approach to encourage youth participation and civic engagement. The Young People's Research and Development Project (United Kingdom) and the Healthy Initiative Collaborative (United States) provide opportunities for youth to become community researchers and problem solvers and thus contribute to community change in ways that are meaningful and empowering to them. Comments from youth in the chapter add to our understanding of the value of a social action approach and the variety of outcomes, including self-awareness, self-reflection, and skill mastery, it can stimulate.

In Chapter Seven, David Brown and Mala Thakur report on the challenges facing youth who are disconnected from our nation's employment and education systems. They share insights into the various strategies that have been implemented to facilitate the transition of older youth to the workforce and feature the work of the Promising and Effective Practices Network to develop tools designed to help organizations develop quality programs that connect youth to jobs, careers, and education.

In Chapter Eight, Mark Ouellette highlights the importance of developing a communitywide approach to supporting the needs of older youth. The need for out-of-school-time supports and opportunities does not disappear with age. Ouellette suggests that the following system-level components are essential to a successful program: an understanding of what youth want, communitywide leadership with an effective plan, coordination among key stakeholders, high school programming standards that include youth voice, and coordinated and adequate funding.

In the final chapter, Nicole Yohalem, Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom, Thaddeus Ferber, and Elizabeth Gaines focus on five issues that demonstrate how policies related to out-of-school time can be aligned with the developmental needs of older youth: financial incentives, school credit, alternative pathways to credentials, participation requirements, and funding. This final chapter reminds us that preparing young people for the future requires the full engagement of all community institutions, small and large, public and private, in supporting learning and development.

This volume delineates the complexities and urgency of supporting older youth as they make the transition from late adolescence to adulthood—their challenges, the skills they need, and the surrounding environment. The good news, as noted in this volume, is that there are many innovative and effective initiatives forging a path forward on which we can continue to build.

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