



SECTION 3:

Community Recommendations for Local Leaders

Despite the many challenges faced by at-risk and disconnected young people aged 14–26, there are opportunities that enable individuals to become reconnected. This research’s 100+ interviews with stakeholders across the state—including municipal leaders, educators and school district leaders, community organization leaders, criminal justice experts, and employers—provided insight into the most promising opportunities to strengthen pathways to reconnection.

(See Exhibit 17) This section synthesizes these insights to provide local leaders with ways they can help transform the lives of Connecticut’s young people for generations to come.

EXHIBIT 17

Strengthening Pathways to Reconnection

Recommendations fall under four key categories



INCREASE VISIBILITY

Expand awareness of the current state of at-risk and disconnected (AR&D) young people

1. Improve school district data systems and practices
2. Publish annual AR&D report



IMPROVE COORDINATION

Strengthen connections between stakeholders supporting AR&D young people

3. Establish cross-sector coalitions and partnerships
4. Designate and fund entities in every municipality



EXPAND CAPACITY

Increase capabilities of high-performing organizations that serve AR&D young people

5. Significantly expand organizational capacity



FUND EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

Invest in scalable, evidence-based supports and services for AR&D young people

6. Invest in expanding supports and services
7. Invest in high-touch case management
8. Invest in tackling chronic absenteeism
9. Strengthen AR&D pathways to employment



Increase visibility:

Community Recommendation 1: Improve school district data systems and practices to identify and support at-risk students

Population(s) served – at-risk

CONTEXT:

Progress has been made in data collection and data-informed decision-making practices in schools and districts, especially through the adoption of learning management systems and student information systems, the emergence of data-informed communities of practice, and the development of a statewide education data platform, EdSight (especially its early warning system tool).³⁵ However, many educators and district leaders interviewed cited the need to build on this progress by better identifying at-risk students in real time and developing tailored interventions to help get them back on track, with a particular focus on the students most at risk of disconnection.

RECOMMENDATION DETAIL:

Education stakeholders have a role in increasing visibility of at-risk students. Stakeholders should build on existing data systems by increasing their capacity to identify and support at-risk students. They should continue investing in data systems and implementation/capacity-building processes that enable better and timely monitoring and support of at-risk students, especially for topics such as:

- Student mobility and transfers
- Student referrals to alternative education, special education, and adult education
- Student experiences with homelessness
- Student experiences with the child welfare system
- Student interactions with the justice system
- Educators' understanding of events in students' lives outside of school

While keeping student privacy in mind, school districts should seek to partner and share data where appropriate with the entity designated by their municipality as responsible for supporting disconnected young people (as articulated in recommendation 4).

Community Recommendation 2: Publish annual reports about at-risk and disconnected young people

Population(s) served – at-risk and disconnected

CONTEXT:

A common theme in the stakeholder interviews was frustration around the lack of visibility on this issue. Stakeholders did not have a clear view into the size of this population or the magnitude of the challenges they faced and were therefore ill-equipped to advocate effectively on their behalf. There is a clear need to continuously spotlight the significance of this issue and encourage collective accountability for the wellbeing of at-risk and disconnected young people.

RECOMMENDATION DETAIL:

The second recommendation is to publish an annual report to continuously spotlight the challenges and opportunities associated with at-risk and disconnected young people and to encourage collective accountability for this population. This recommendation takes inspiration from, among other examples, the reporting of child fatalities conducted by Connecticut's Office of the Child Advocate.³⁶ The report should include the overall count of at-risk and disconnected young people and breakdowns by key demographics and subgroups (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, age, municipality). Over time, the report should be expanded to include data on at-risk and disconnected young people's interactions with additional systems (e.g., justice) and analysis of promising practices and exemplar programs that stakeholders might emulate.

Improve coordination

Community Recommendation 3: Establish cross-sector coalitions and partnerships focused on supporting at-risk and disconnected young people

Population(s) served – at-risk and disconnected

CONTEXT:

Another key challenge noted by stakeholders is a significant need for an organized effort to better support disconnected young people. Though the state has many promising service providers, they face challenges in identifying those most in need and coordinating effectively with one another to provide supports, especially in regard to sharing information. Coordination across town borders is especially important, given the transiency many disconnected young people experience. The lack of a centralized, integrated effort

that is responsible for this population leaves many disconnected young people to fall through the cracks.

“Identification and monitoring are where everything gets tricky . . . disconnected young people are identified through word-of-mouth on the ground, not formal systems”

—Local law enforcement leader

RECOMMENDATION DETAIL:

Recommendation 3 is to establish regional and/or statewide cross-sector coalitions and partnerships focused on supporting at-risk and disconnected young people. This would include identifying them in a consistent way and coordinating and advocating on their behalf. Coalitions or partnerships could assume leadership roles in sustained coordination, including by reporting on outcomes for at-risk and disconnected young people, thereby creating accountability for stakeholders and spotlighting programs that would benefit this population.

Coalitions could include community organizations that directly serve this population, Youth Service Bureaus and other local public entities, educational institutions and school districts, adult education programs and community colleges, workforce training programs, and entities that interact with specific subgroups such as homeless or justice-involved young people. Coalitions could partner or closely collaborate with, among others, regional collective impact movements and related statewide initiatives such as the Coalition for a Working Connecticut and the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee (JJPOC).

Community Recommendation 4: Designate an entity in every municipality or region responsible for supporting disconnected young people

Population(s) served – disconnected

CONTEXT:

Given that disconnected young people are not involved in educational institutions or the workforce and often not referred to service organizations, it is especially challenging to identify them and provide the long-term supports they require. While many municipalities have entities such as Youth Service Bureaus or community organizations that case manage and support this population, most do not have a mandate to identify and support all disconnected young people in their municipality.

RECOMMENDATION DETAIL:

All of Connecticut’s municipalities should designate and fund an organizational entity, beyond the school district,

that takes ownership and responsibility for identifying and supporting disconnected young people and connecting them to crucial services and supports. This recommendation takes inspiration from the data-based community needs mapping and risk-prediction work conducted in public health to enable earlier identification and support of high-risk individuals and families.

The appropriate entity and jurisdiction is likely to differ by municipality. It may be appropriate for a branch of the municipal government, an existing community organization, a community health center, or even the public housing authority to play this role. In some municipalities, it may make more sense for a regional entity such as a regional governmental organization (e.g, the Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG)) or a regional collective impact organization to play this role. These entities could serve as the core of the coalitions articulated in recommendation 3.

Expand capacity

Community Recommendation 5: Significantly strengthen the capacity of organizations that serve at-risk and disconnected young people

Population(s) served – at-risk and disconnected

CONTEXT:

Addressing the complex, multifaceted challenges at-risk and disconnected young people face requires the use of rigorous, evidence-based practices. Developing the capabilities and expertise needed to successfully execute this work takes significant upfront training and continuous monitoring for programmatic improvements. Most organizations that currently provide or aspire to provide services to at-risk and disconnected young people are capacity constrained, and collectively Connecticut’s service providers are ill-equipped to address the magnitude of this crisis.

RECOMMENDATION DETAIL:

To address this gap in capacity, organizations (community-based nonprofits, school districts, etc.) need significant technical assistance. Topics to consider include, but are not limited to:

- Program design and implementation, including support with identifying and scaling evidence-based practices
- Talent attraction, development, and retention to increase capacity and reduce staff turnover
- Data collection, analysis, and sharing to better understand target populations and outcomes from interventions

- Key performance indicator (KPI) tracking to measure organizational impact and make the case for increased/continued funding
- Financial management support, including long-term budget planning and fundraising efforts
- IT support, including setting up systems to streamline back-office operations

As a precursor to providing technical assistance, it is critical to first identify the Connecticut organizations most likely to benefit from investment, including those that are serving this target population.

Fund effective programs

Community Recommendation 6: Invest in expanding supports and services for at-risk and disconnected young people

Population(s) served – at-risk and disconnected

CONTEXT:

There is currently a lack of funding to address the magnitude of this challenge in Connecticut, given the 119,000 14- to 26-year-olds in the state who require support. This funding gap will be especially problematic in the coming years, as pandemic-related federal funding for various programs runs out. Greater financial resources are required to execute a large-scale expansion in comprehensive, evidence-based supports and services to prevent at-risk young people from experiencing disconnection and to create pathways for disconnected young people to become engaged citizens.

RECOMMENDATION DETAIL:

Adequately addressing this crisis will require significant infusions of funding over multiple years, given that programs are not currently equipped to serve the sheer volume of need. These investments should be targeted toward the communities with higher rates of at-risk and disconnected young people, and any financial support for addressing technical needs should be paired with rigorous measurement of outcomes to ensure it results in the desired impact.

This expansion in services should be targeted to address the most salient issues facing at-risk and disconnected

“What we really need are localized, coordinated hubs of services that can stick with the [young person] for the long haul”

– Leader of nonprofit serving disconnected young people



young people today, including:

- Chronic absenteeism and truancy in schools
- School transfers/high mobility
- Mental health and life/soft skills
- Family stability, including experiences in foster care and group homes
- Justice involvement and exposure to violence
- Poverty, housing insecurity, and homelessness
- Migration, including the experiences of being undocumented
- Challenges with gaining employment and building a career

Community Recommendation 7: Invest in high-touch case management for at-risk and disconnected young people

Population(s) served – at-risk and disconnected

CONTEXT:

Interviewees consistently described high-touch case management as a highly effective tool to identify and support at-risk and disconnected young people across contexts; case management is especially effective for disconnected young people, who are otherwise very difficult to reach due to their limited involvement with formal systems and services. Of the host of case management tools described, cognitive behavioral therapy was cited as a particularly promising approach for teaching practical skills to understand and change negative thought patterns and behaviors.

External literature also highlights the impact of intensive case management for our target population. One evaluation of disconnected young people³⁷ indicated that case management interventions reduced school suspensions, increased course completion and return to high school, improved employability skills and employment rates, and increased families' participation in their children's education and service receipt from a partner. When coupled with Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) services, case management was found to increase the probability of completing GED certification and achieving readiness for college coursework. Another study of people experiencing homelessness³⁸ found that intensive case management substantially reduced the number of days spent homeless as well as substance and alcohol use. These studies demonstrate that intensive support, ideally in a face-to-face

environment and with targeted skills training, can improve educational and employment outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION DETAIL:

Further investment is needed in high-touch case management, given the central role it often plays in identifying, preventing, and supporting at-risk and disconnected young people. Key roles case management can play include:

- Providing a young person with a stable and positive relationship with a trusted adult/case manager
- Monitoring the young person over time
- Understanding the young person's context, needs, and aspirations and connecting them to services
- Providing growth opportunities through mentorship based on cognitive behavioral therapy principles
- Identifying additional at-risk and disconnected young people to serve (e.g., friends or siblings of program participants)

Community Recommendation 8: Invest in tackling chronic absenteeism

Population(s) served – at-risk

CONTEXT:

Absenteeism is a key risk factor for high school non-graduation and experiencing disconnection. Connecticut's high schools are seeing unprecedented levels of chronic absenteeism and truancy. Though an increase in absenteeism during COVID-19 was to be expected, counts have remained significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels, despite a return to in-person instruction. The persistence of this issue indicates the underlying challenge schools are facing in meaningfully engaging students and families and meeting young people where they are.

RECOMMENDATION DETAIL:

Significant investments should be made to tackle the state's unprecedented absenteeism and truancy rates, with a focus on the highest-need districts. Though chronic absenteeism and its underlying drivers have no obvious, singular fix, there are programs and policies that have shown promise as being effective elements of a solution. First, to accurately count attendance, districts should track such that the default status is "absent" instead of "present." Currently, this is not standard, but default "present" will systematically overcount students in attendance and therefore mask the true extent of the challenge.

Second, programs that work to diagnose and solve root causes of attendance issues should be invested in further. The state’s Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP), a home visit program to engage chronically absent students and their families, is a promising example. Among the 9,000 students who participated, students in grades 6–12 experienced ~16% increase in attendance rates after nine months in the program.³⁹

Third, attendance review boards, which formally established attendance case management at the school level and performance management at the district level, have shown promise in identifying chronically absent students and tracking efforts to encourage their attendance. While state policy mandates the establishment of attendance review boards in districts with levels of chronic absenteeism at 10% or higher,⁴⁰ any school seeking to strengthen its attendance levels might consider this approach.

Though the initiatives above can be part of addressing chronic absenteeism, it is critical for stakeholders to recognize that holistic, systemic change is needed and programmatic solutions alone will not be enough. Leaders need to look beyond strategies to get students into the building and to also think imaginatively about how to better motivate and engage students while they’re there. If students do not feel a sense of belonging in school or feel that their learning is relevant to their future, improving attendance rates can be only part of the solution.

Community Recommendation 9: Invest in strengthening pathways from disconnection to employment

Population(s) served – Disconnected

CONTEXT:

Many Connecticut employers and existing workforce development programs have pressing talent needs, especially in industries suffering from labor shortages (e.g., manufacturing, health care, and construction). Roughly 39,000 job openings in the state today could be filled with young people without post-secondary attainment; if the state could support young people in completing postsecondary education, an additional 10,000 could be filled by those with associate’s degrees, and 36,000 by those with bachelor’s degrees.⁴¹ Disconnected young people have the potential to fill those gaps, but first employers need to be convinced of that potential and brought on board. These young people need to be systematically identified, connected to existing opportunities, and once connected, comprehensively supported to be successful.

“We need to go beyond charitable contributions to ‘roll-up-your sleeve’ partnerships with employers”

RECOMMENDATION DETAIL:

Stronger linkages are needed between the organizations that serve young people along the pathway from disconnection to gainful employment. As a starting point, all parties should recognize the potential of these young people and consider stable, long-term employment the guiding North Star for this population. Next, to address their pressing labor needs, Connecticut’s employers should invest in this talent pool by partnering with service providers to develop and strengthen pathways to employment. For example, one approach could involve service providers offering mentorship to disconnected young people, determining participant readiness for employer-run workforce training programs, and connecting young people to existing opportunities, while continuing to provide wraparound services to support retention.

Further research, investment, and experimentation is needed to determine the most effective approaches to strengthening pathways, but additional ideas surfaced by stakeholders include vocational education in schools and prisons, summer internships offered by employers focused on at-risk young people, and expansion of the state’s existing apprenticeship and workforce training programs.