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The Sixth Audio Conference of the 2004 CLASP Audio Conference Series, “The Squeeze: Helping Low-Income Families in an Era of Dwindling Resources”

LINDA HARRIS: Hello and welcome to the last call in the 2004 CLASP Audio Conference Series, “The Squeeze: Helping Low-Income Families in an Era of Dwindling Resources.”

My name is Linda Harris. I am a Senior Policy Analyst at CLASP focusing in the area of disconnected youth. I’m very pleased to be hosting today’s call on “Disconnected Youth: Educational Pathways to Reconnection.” I’m pleased to be joined by three experts in the area: Rob Ivry, Senior Vice President at MDRC; Laurel Dukehart, Manager of the Gateway to College Replication Project at Portland Community College; and Jack Wuest, who is Director of the Chicago Alternative Schools Network.

We have a great audience today for this call. We estimate that there are nearly 1,200 people listening in more than 165 sites in 36 states and in the District. This is a real testament to the growing interest and concern about this pressing problem.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation recently highlighted the plight of disconnected youth with their recent “Kids Count” release. They estimate that there are 3.8 million disconnected youth between the ages of 18 to 24. If you extend that range from 16 to 24, we are talking about more than five million youth. These are young high school dropouts, youths who are in foster care, or in the justice system. The youth are disproportionately minority and low-income. They are low-skilled and far outside the labor market mainstream. Addressing this problem will require efforts at scale—efforts that craft alternative pathways that bring systems together, that blend resources, and that build on the delivery strength within our communities.

These are the topics that our panelists will elaborate on, but first let me do a brief biographical sketch of each of the three presenters.

- Rob Ivry is a nationally known expert on policy issues, especially in the areas of workforce development, education reform, welfare reform, and youth development. His work at MDRC has served to inform public policy and improve practice in the field. He has been involved in MDRC’s extensive work evaluating promising practices in youth development and school reform.

- Laurel Dukehart is the Manager of the Gateway to College Replication for Portland Community College. This exciting replication project is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, who chose Portland Community College as one of ten national intermediaries. Laurel has extensive background in education and workforce development policy and will be overseeing the replication of the Gateway model in eight sites across the country.
- Jack Wuest is Director of the Alternative Schools Network in Chicago, which has been in operation since 1973 supporting community-based delivery of training and educational services to youth in inner-city neighborhoods. Jack has been a consistent and effective advocate for community involvement in developing and running programs and has an impressive track record of operating successful education and employment programs.

So, let's get started. Rob, we're going to start with you. MDRC has done considerable research over the years to determine what works. Tell us a bit about the MDRC work.

ROB IVRY: Greetings from sunny New York. The issue of high-risk youth is an issue that's been close and dear to my heart personally and to MDRC's since the organization's inception 30 years ago. Linda and I actually worked together directing youth programs in Baltimore back in the 70s; then, I joined MDRC in 1980.

Over the past 30 years, we have been involved in a number of major national youth evaluations and demonstration programs, including the national evaluation of a Job Training Partnership Act. We were involved in the evaluations of some of the Carter Administration youth programs for anybody who could remember back that far in 1976 and 1977, and more recently we've been involved in some particular demonstrations that were focused on recapturing out-of-school youth.

One of the questions that one may ask is: "how do you know if a youth program is effective?" To what extent do you know that any outcomes that are being generated are due to the program itself rather than any extraneous factors? One of the MDRC's trademarks is that we try to use the most rigorous methods possible to determining whether or not a youth program makes a difference. The most reliable way to do that is through a process called random assignment, in which you compare what happens to individuals who go through an intervention or program and compare them to a randomly selected control group who doesn't. Then you know for sure that any differences in outcomes—such as graduation rates, job placement rates, or earnings—could be attributed to the program and not to other factors. The reason why this is important is that Congress and federal policymakers are paying much more attention to higher standards of evidence in determining whether they should make federal investments in youth programs and other social interventions.

LINDA HARRIS: Rob, what programs have you evaluated and what has research told you about what does work?

ROB IVRY: What we've tried to do is try to look across not only our own evaluations, but evaluations that have been done by other firms that meet these high standards. I think if you look historically over the last 30 years, this story is somewhat mixed. Unfortunately, there are a lot of programs, including some that we've been associated with like the JTPA evaluation and some of our home-grown demonstrations like Job Start, that turned out to be disappointing.

However, there is a glass-half-full side of the story as well. There have been some interventions that focus on younger middle-aged students, such as the Quantum Opportunity Program and Big Brothers and Sisters and CAS-Carrera, that have been proven effective—as well as some large scale programs, like Job Corps and the Conservation Corps, that are really focused on reengaging young people who have dropped out of school. If you take a further analysis of the programs that have been more effective—and not only the ones I mentioned but some other large-scale projects like Youth Build and the National Guard Challenge Program—what you find is that they seem to have five core elements in common. I guess you could make the assumption that these elements may be associated with driving the positive effects:

- First, there seems to be a continuity with caring adults—these are supportive, nurturing environments and the continuity of adult contact is very important.
- Secondly, a central part of these programs is that they either have paid work experience as part of the initiative or there are some financial incentives that are tied to meeting certain benchmarks.
- Third, to the extent that education and training are part of these initiatives, there's a real focus on learning by doing. Hands-on engaged experiential approaches to education and training.
- Fourth, there are opportunities to become leaders and to share in the governing structure of the programs.
- And, fifth, there's a lot of peer support and mentoring and counseling that are associated with the other activities.

Those seem to be the factors that are associated with success. Now a few insights on why programs haven't been more successful. I think there are three points to make here. One is uneven implementation. So it's not only the program components, but strong implementation and management capacity are also very important. Secondly, even the best-laid plans have not worked well because of high attrition—that even some of the more comprehensive programs have experienced high attrition patterns means that youth don't stay long enough to benefit from all that the program may be offering. So, figuring out ways to make programs more engaging is very important. Finally, knowing what subgroups to focus on is really important because one of the issues that comes up in doing experimental and random-assignment evaluations is that you find that the control group did just as well on their own. One of the things that you want to be able to assured of is to try to reach subgroups of the youth population that wouldn't likely to succeed without the intervention.

It's interesting that both the White House Task Force Report and the Casey Kids Count Report both place an emphasis on focusing on more at-risk subgroups for the youth population, like youth aging out of foster care or youth coming out of the criminal justice system, and I think youth programs overall should do more outreach to reach those populations.

LINDA HARRIS: Rob, it's interesting when you talk about high-risk groups. You had a recent study that was just released on Career Academies that had some significant findings related to high-risk youth, particularly young men. Do you want to mention that?

ROB IVRY: Yes, this is really been a fascinating study—of the most pleasurable that I’ve been associated with in my career. For those of you who are not familiar with Career Academies, let me give you the 30-second background. Career Academies are one of the more established and pervasive school-to-career programs. They been around for over 30 years, and there are probably 3,000 high schools that have them now.

They basically have three core components. There’s a school-in-a-school structure, so it creates a small learning community. There’s an academic curriculum integrated around a career theme—so there are health academies and business and financial academies. And the third component is the business partnerships. Companies that are aligned with a career theme provide career development and work-based learning experiences for students while they’re in high school.

Now we’ve been fortunate to have been associated with an eight-year, longitudinal, random-assignment evaluation that has involved nine career academies throughout the country. These are tough academies in tough urban high schools like Anacostia in Washington, D.C., and Lake Clifton in Baltimore. We have about 1,700 students in our research sample. About 15 percent are Latino, 30 percent African-American, and we’ve followed these students for over eight years. We’ve looked at their experiences during the four years in high school and during the four years post-high school, and, as Linda mentioned, one of the most surprising findings that we’ve found is that the academies are having a long-term and sustained impact on employment and earnings, especially for the males in the sample.

Just to provide some context for this: Somebody with a couple of years post-secondary education will be earning on average \$150.00 per month more than someone with just a high school diploma. But the academies have actually increased earnings for males by \$212.00 a month without any post-secondary education, which is quite astonishing especially when you think that the overwhelming part of the sample are young people of color.

Now the interesting thing about the earnings effect is that they did not come at the expense of educational effects. That young people who went through academies were just as likely to graduate from high school and go on to post-secondary education—and, in addition, they were able to get this big earnings boost. The obvious question is: Given the multifaceted nature of the academies, what seems to be driving these earnings effects? And the main reason they seem to be occurring is because of the nature of the work-based learning experiences that the young people had while they were in high school. That they were more likely to be working in better quality jobs in hospitals, insurance companies, and banks than the young people in the control group who were working in the typical youth jobs. The young people in the academies were able to parlay these experiences in high school and become part of job networks that middle-class kids are typically part of and able to use that as leverage to get better jobs once they’ve finished high school.

LINDA HARRIS: Thanks, Rob. That’s really important information for folks thinking about how to make a difference.

Laurel, we’re going to move to you. Portland Community College also has had a long history in working with high school dropouts and reconnecting them, and your Gateway to College Program is particularly unique in that it offers a dual track for credentialing. Do you want to describe your program for the listeners?

LAUREL DUKEHART: Certainly. The Gateway to College Program is very unique. We work with young people 16 to 20 who have either dropped out of high school or had all but one foot out the door. These young people are definitely behind in credits for their age, have a lot of history of attendance problems, and have basically not been successful at all in the traditional high school environment. We are able to offer them a real second chance at their education. It's all college-based. They come onto the community college campus, and through a series of life courses they're able to complete their high school diploma requirements while also earning college credits toward an associate's degree. Basically, they're able to complete all of their educational goals at the same time.

The adult learning environment is very motivating for these young people. They're around people who want to be here. They see people succeeding. There are very high expectations for their performance and their attendance.

Let me just spend a minute telling you how we take these young people who have basically come to us with almost no high school credits and prepare them to succeed in the adult learning environment. There's really a couple of pieces to the story. One is that we provide wraparound support for the students—a lot of the elements that Rob just mentioned as the pieces that are important for student success. We have resource specialists that act as coaches, mentors, and advisors who work with these students throughout their time in the program. We also start them out with a “cohort term” where they're with their age peers building up their basic skills to get ready to transition to the comprehensive campus. Basically, we only have one term with them to get their skills up to kind of fly on their own in the college environment. Another piece that we have during that cohort is an academic log because one of the things that we know about these students is they haven't done a real good job of doing their homework in the past. They may think they understand something in class, go home to try to do it on their own, and find out that it wasn't cemented enough. We work a lot on practicing skills, having them experience incremental success and really cement the skills as they go—so it's step-by-step to success.

We treat it as a scholarship program. We expect all of the students to earn a “C” or better in all of their classes. Because we're able to fund this program with K-12 dollars to fund their tuition and books, we do tell them, “Look, you haven't been successful in high school and you never thought of yourself as going to college. We're going to give you a second chance that involves a college scholarship.” And it's very motivating for the students.

Just to give you a little sense of scale, we've worked with over 850 students and we're experiencing about a 92-percent attendance rate with these students. The graduates from last year—we haven't done all the statistics from this year yet—but 51 percent of the students graduated with honors. Eighty percent of them are continuing their college educations after earning their diploma, and the average number of college credits that they've earned at the time that they earn their diploma is 64, which here in Oregon is about two-thirds of the way to the AA degree. Another 9 percent of them got the AA degree at the same time. So it's been very successful.

LINDA HARRIS: Laurel, those are impressive statistics and impressive numbers. How long does it generally take a young person to achieve their high school diploma and go on?

LAUREL DUKEHART: That's a difficult question to answer because every student is a unique case, but I'll answer the question by just giving you a couple of scenarios.

We may have a student who comes to us at 16 who has only one or two high school credits. They're going to be in the program at least three years in order to earn all their credits that they need. This isn't a faster path to a diploma, but it's very efficient in that they're also working toward their college goals at the same time.

We may get an older student who comes to us maybe half way to their diploma. Of course, it will take them less time.

LINDA HARRIS: What segment of the dropout population is your program appropriate for? Who do you attract to the program?

LAUREL DUKEHART: Our young people have faced many challenges. We have a lot of English language learners. It's a very diverse population. We do have quite a few teen parents who come to the program. Former gang members. Students who struggle with substance abuse. But the general characteristic is that the students tell us that they did not fit in to what they call the brutal social scene of high school for a number of reasons: the way they look, sexual orientation, poverty, they can't wear the right clothes.

The stories that they tell us about why high school didn't work for them are varied. Many of them work. Half of our students live on their own away from their parents, but one thing that we found out about these students is they're not academically incapable. They may not have demonstrated any academic success in high school, but they have the opportunity, with the right academic model and ongoing support, to succeed in college.

I told you a little bit about the statistics of our students. The average student in our program is just over 17. Comes to us with a grade point average of 1.89, which is pretty low, and with only 4.3 high school credits out of 22 in Oregon needed for a diploma. That means they're basically a junior or more in age and just barely a freshman in terms of their credits.

We do have a couple of prerequisites to tell you about, but the most important one is that they really, really need to be ready to work hard and benefit for the program. We jump them through a lot of hoops to make sure that they're really ready to commit to this because we have more students who'd like to participate than we have funding for. The other prerequisite is that we make sure that they're at least at the eighth-grade reading level in English because they need that to be able to benefit from the program and succeed in college. We're not trying to set them up to fail again. So they need to be able to be at about the eighth-grade reading level in English. There is no math minimum though.

LINDA HARRIS: I'm sure some of the listeners would like to know how you make this happen in a community. Since you are involved in the replication, talk a bit about what's the key to replication, including funding options?

LAUREL DUKEHART: First, let me say that we're very grateful to have been selected by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and their partners to be able to replicate this program because it is very unique, focusing on bringing dropouts into the college environment.

What we're looking for in the communities that we're choosing is: there's a really strong partnership between a community college and a school district or a number of school districts because the sustainability element of this model is using K-12 dollars. Oregon and actually quite a few states do allow dollars to follow the student until the age of 21, if that student is engaged in

completing their high school diploma. We use K-12 dollars for books and tuition. Here in Oregon we do that through contracts with our partners. Some of our replication sites are doing it through charter arrangements, where the charter school has been proposed jointly by the community college district and the school district to enable the funding to flow.

The other thing that we look for is the ability for the college to award a high school diploma. PCC is able to award that diploma and has state certification in order to do that. A couple of our replication sites are doing it through memoranda of understanding with the school district. There are a number of ways to work that out. Also, there needs to be a regulatory environment that supports dual enrollment. I think we're going to talk about some of those issues later, but some states are more friendly to that approach than others.

LINDA HARRIS: OK, thanks a lot. We will get back to that.

LAUREL DUKEHART: Great.

LINDA HARRIS: Jack. Now, Jack's in Chicago, and I should indicate that Jack is just about to go into a graduation celebration for some of his students who were, I think, foster care students who are now graduating. The Alternative School Network is about 30 years old and really grew out of a more community-based approach to tackling this problem. Talk a bit about the network of alternative schools and how they come about and how you're structured.

JACK WUEST: Chicago has a huge dropout problem. About 16,000 officially drop out. It's up to about 21,000 kids drop out of the high schools every year. A lot of groups in the community are working with kids who are out of school, and they work with the kids from 2:30 to maybe 6:00, 7:30. Diversion programs, criminal justice often started scratching their heads and say what's the kid doing from 8:30 or whenever they wakeup until about 2:30. The conclusion they came to—they had to leave school. So they've started schools to do this.

There's also grade schools. Some people started grade schools. People may have heard of Marva Collins. We supported her when she started her grade school, and there's a range of adult learning centers to that we do.

Basically, these are non-public schools. They could call them private, but 99.9 percent of their money is public. At the high school level, we've developed a wide range of programs and the network operates as an association to do three basic things:

First, to support the schools in resource development. Wide range of resources. Whether it's money, there have been free textbooks—a whole range of things like that.

Secondly, we do a wide range of programs that we pass money through to the schools and we've developed a charter school with the Board of Ed. We're focused on kids who have dropped out. The second area that we do is a lot of joint programs where we include lots of training for staff. We do a basketball league. A big prom with 600-700 kids and a whole range of programs that bring the schools together. We're planning to do a whole range of hearings that youth will run in their neighborhoods with local data we've run showing how many kids are dropouts out of school in their own neighborhoods. We've done it by local legislative districts, and these hearings will lead to the kids working with legislators as to coming up with more solutions, more systemic solutions. So, the second piece is a lot of joint projects that we do between the schools and breakdown the isolation.

The third area is a lot of policy and programming. We've done that since we've first started. We've worked together; I think I first met Rob back in the 70s when we worked with the Carter Administration on what was then the Youth Act—and I'll get into that a little later—\$2.0 billion initiative for youth and all the different programs that had been funded in the 70s to kind of lead to the Youth Act. We've done a lot of local politicking. I learned that the only way to really move this money for kids who are on the street is you have to do a lot of politicking. You've got to run programs that can show what the effect of the programs are on the kids and hard measures of attendance, skill gains, credit gains. What kids move from junior to senior? Sophomore to junior? What kids graduate? The numbers of kids who graduate? What are the percentages, and then what kids transition? But that only takes you half way.

You've got to really find champions in the legislative arena and somewhat the business arena to move this along. So we've issued a lot of different reports showing how bad things are and getting much worse for youth. The next step is to really say, "OK, we know it works." There's lots of data that shows what works. There's not a lot of political commitment to that—and again I'll get into that later—but we want to make sure that the people who ought to know, know, and then build a political will to develop more programs, not just simply say how bad things are.

So those are the three things we do. We get resource development and a wide range of funding sources. We do joint projects, and we work on policy.

LINDA HARRIS: Jack, you have a number of community-based schools, and you mentioned the charter school arrangements that you have. What distinguishes that educational environment from what these youngsters dropped out of?

JACK WUEST: Well, each school—particularly at the high school level—is very small, maybe 60 to about 120 kids, which is really where they ought to go at the public school level, too. And if they ask the kids why they come in our schools and why they have left the streets, they say well they've heard about the school because it's been there for a while and they knew other friends who've done it—and some kids are even a second generation. Why did you leave public schools? It's pretty straightforward: they've left the public schools because they simply don't get the time and effort and the personal concern at the public school level and they do get it at our schools.

LINDA HARRIS: Are they awarded diplomas?

JACK WUEST: Yes. Each school is a state-recognized program and it can offer a high school diploma.

LINDA HARRIS: You mentioned the young people. You actually do target youngsters in very high-risk categories. Do you want to talk about the youngsters that you serve and the challenges that they present?

JACK WUEST: Yes. These schools are in many cases part of larger social service agencies, and they're stuck right in the middle of the inner-city areas where the jobless rates of youth are 70 to 80 percent. The dropout numbers are astronomically higher in high school. Inner-city high schools in Chicago public schools have dropout rates of 50 and 60 and 70 percent. The overall rate is 43 percent. So there are lots of kids on the street. The schools are geared up to work with kids.

I'll run through a couple of programs. We do one program with the State Department of Children and Family Services, which is responsible for kids who are in foster care. In fact, that's why I'm here today. We're having a big celebration for the 80 kids who've graduated this year. We work with older foster care youth. The average age is 19. Forty percent are teen parents. They come in sixth grades below in reading where they should be for their age—and math the same way.

The positive outcomes between graduations and transfers is about 45 percent, which is very good. The program's modeled under the Climb Opportunities Program, which is really pretty straightforward. You provide incentives for kids—they can build scholarship, individual development accounts. They can't access those accounts until they graduate and go to college or training.

There's a mentor who's a full-time paid person to be a bird dog—one to about 12 to 13 kids. The mentor does whatever it takes to get that kid into school. Keep him in school. Do stuff after school with him. Then we also have a learning center in each school that uses state-of-the-art technology, the extra learning programs that been developed by Dr. Bob Taggart and really accelerate kids' skills, remediate the skills. We've cross-referenced this learning system to the state standards so kids can walk in at an average grade—you know maybe a freshman year, maybe five credits—they can get credits on time-based and they can get credits on competency-based credits, which is a huge issue for kids who are older.

The kids we work with are nice kids. They've got endless crises. You need people who are really skilled. We provide a lot of training for the mentors. There's a lot of support for them in the schools and a lot of support for the schools themselves.

We work together with the Principals Association, a really creative group here in Chicago to really provide ...

LINDA HARRIS: I'm sorry. The Principals Association of the Alternative Schools?

JACK WUEST: No, no. The public school system, but they're very nice people and they like what we do. They like the fact that they can come into a school that's not 1,000 kids, but 100 kids, and they can really see real changes when you get eight or 10 staff who really get together and plan as team with the principal and then go on from there to really change their program around.

So a lot of staff training. A lot of support. Adequate funding. You know we're not getting enough money, but that's part of the political campaign we're going to develop.

We have a large WIA program—Workforce Investment Act Program—that funding I think is on the downswing right now. Then we have other kinds of social services funding, so we piece together a wide range of funding, plus we've developed with the Board of Education here a charter school. It doesn't pay enough. It's about \$5,200 a kid, but it serves 2,200 kids. This year the charter school's graduated almost 900 kids who have been on the street. So there's a wide range of programming and funding. Then we're going to step it up when we're off this conference call; I'd love to talk to Laurel because we've found some states that provide direct incentives to local school districts—Iowa does this—gives 125 percent of the average daily attendance money and other kinds of incentives like that for local school districts that want to re-enroll dropouts.

LINDA HARRIS: Interesting. And the money for your charter school—are the K-12 dollars following the kids to support your charter?

JACK WUEST: Yes. There's a special fund for charter schools of the state funds and then we have to prorate it by the attendance and the difference is made up by the city, Board of Education. If a kid attends 80 percent, that amounts to about \$4,000 out of \$5,000 per kid and then the other \$1,000 will be made up by the city property taxes and other kind of funds.

LINDA HARRIS: Very interesting. Now I want to direct some questions across the panel and ask any of you to address them. You know there's an increasing pressure on quality and rigor in academic standards and achievement. How do you balance this pressure regarding quality and standards with the fact that so many young people come in with severe educational deficits? Laurel, you want to take a stab at that?

LAUREL DUKEHART: Sure. I mentioned a little bit about our cohort where we select teachers for that first term with the students who are really committed to this target population, have a lot of background in college and in K-12, understand where the students have come from, but also can see where they're going so they can prepare them in steps for success.

They start out at a developmental education level in college and move them up, so that they'll be prepared to start taking the 100-level classes or higher as soon as they transition to the comprehensive campus. Obviously, the support that's provided by a resource specialist is very important to providing the kinds of note-taking skills, study habits, test taking, time management.

They work very closely during that cohort term with the students to not only help them read better, get their math skills up, but to figure out how to be a college student. Another element that I'd like to mention is that our program has gone through a great deal of curriculum alignment so that we're making sure that students are getting the high school content that they need to pass the high-stakes exit exams that students have to face in high school—plus, of course, all of the college content that's required in order to make sure that they're really meeting both of their objectives: a full high school diploma and college success. That curriculum alignment really relies again on this partnership between the school district and the college. So there needs to be a lot of community will around working with these students and giving them another opportunity. But the students step up to the plate and do very well.

LINDA HARRIS: That's excellent. Jack, did graduation requirements pose a challenge for the alternative schools?

JACK WUEST: Yes. Our program of non-public schools kids can graduate with 16 to 18 credits, and the usual stuff in the public schools is 24, so there's more flexibility.

I think the kids are caught in a kind of a double-bind here—a real trap. They are asked to do more, and we're getting less. The public schools are getting less. The funding at least for the Chicago public schools isn't enough. The funding for charter schools isn't enough. Again, it's real clear what can be done in terms of programming. What kind of models can be ramped up and developed in the systems, but there's just not the political will and we've demonstrated this. That's the direction we're going to move in the next year or two.

LINDA HARRIS: OK. Rob, does the research shed any light on this issue of how to move all youth to the same academic level?

ROBERT IVRY: It does provide some insight on different approaches and philosophies that can try to accommodate the educational needs of young people with other needs. I'll give a couple of examples of that.

First of all, a lot of the comprehensive high school reforms that are underway now are dealing with young people entering ninth grade way behind in reading and math. Some of them have really developed some very interesting adolescent literacy models that are really age-appropriate for the young people coming into them. One example is the Talent Development High School, which is for ninth graders coming in who are behind; they get a double dose of both reading and math, but the curriculum is really oriented towards the age group of the kids and it's not the standard decoding and phonics that you would typically get if you were in elementary school. So there are some lessons to be learned about the different adolescent literacy models.

There's also a functional literacy approach that programs like CET—The Center for Employment and Training—have used effectively for probably 30 years. The idea is to provide young people with the education that they need to do a particular job and to integrate the education as part of the training. They've done this very effectively and in a fairly compressed way.

Then, if you look at the post-secondary level, there seems to be a movement towards the creation of learning communities for entering freshman in community colleges. Students who may come in with developmental gaps, and therefore don't qualify immediately for the academic credit side of college, can go into a learning community where they would take a developmental reading or math class in conjunction with an academic content class in their major and maybe a college affirmation class. You'd have a cohort of two or three faculty members working together with them within this learning community. Part of the goal is to build these peer support networks, but also part of the goal is to help accelerate young people's ability to get out of the remedial classes in the community college and mainstream into the core college programs. These learning communities seem to be doing a good job of that.

LINDA HARRIS: Alright ...

JACK WUEST: Let me just say the other thing is that when the whole idea for standards developed in the late 80s, there was a lot more thought given to the complexity of the types of skills kids would learn and how those skills would be measured in terms of portfolios. And a bunch of us that were involved with the groups that were doing this in the late 80's just warned that the trickle down—as much as they might want to have standards that would be more complex—that it would trickle down to the local school district level and would all come down to super-testing. That's exactly what has happened, and the No Child Left Behind stuff is driving lots of kids out of school because the kids are high risk and drag down their testing scores and they're going to boost up their dropout rates.

LINDA HARRIS: Well, there has really been quite bit of concern about what the potential impact of high-stakes testing will be on increasing the number of young people who have become disconnected. I think that also points to the real need and concern about educational options that can bring young people up to the level that's going to be necessary to be competitive in the programs, such as the ones that you and Laurel are talking about here. And I think that's no small challenge.

Let me ask another question that's about the labor market preparation. Are there key activities that you all have in place to prepare young people specifically for the labor markets—or in your case, Rob, see activities that seem to correlate with success in the labor market?

Laurel, I know you're doing some articulation between your curriculum and occupations. Do you want to talk about that?

LAUREL DUKEHART: Sure. During the cohort term, which is their first experience here in Gateway to College, the students take a career development class. They start right away thinking about what their goals might be—doing exploration and all of the typical activities that are associated with that type of career exploration class. At the end of the cohort term, they choose a pathway or major, and this is basically another form of alignment so that our students are not wasting any credits.

We have developed advising tools that are related to over 50 different types of academic career preparations, including the transfer to a four-year college, but also other kinds of programs. The high school requirements are laid down next to the college requirements and it's been signed off by the high schools, by the deans here at the college, so that we know that the student is going to be able to meet all of their goals. We focus on the basics first. We don't let the students wait too long to take all of their math classes, and we make sure that they're really making progress and feeling motivated. That they're achieving what they need to do in order to be able to graduate and end up with a job that's what they're looking for and that meets their goals.

Of course, our students can participate in internships and any other type of mentorship or practicum associated with their major as well, just like any other college student.

JACK WUEST: The other thing is, when we developed this program with the older foster care youth, we didn't call it alternative education. We called it Youth Skills Development Training Program because the kids have to obviously develop their reading and math skills, but it's really they also have to develop their social skills. And the average time a kid is out of school before they come into the program is nine months. So, they're just hanging out, and there's lots of kids hanging out. In Chicago, there are almost 100,000 kids who are 16 to 24 who are out of school and out of work. Just hanging out. Across the country, it's reached epidemic of about 5.7 million.

So the struggle is to get the kid off the street first, to keep him off the street, because there's lots of stuff going on in the street that keeps dragging them back there. The social skills issue and an academic and a reading and math skills issue—that's really critical. You get that in place. Then what we're doing now—since there's now no summer job program, which is a travesty—we are figuring out some way to support a lot of our kids who are returning who have finished school in June and then we want them to come back in September. So we're figuring out ways to employ them and keep them in school a couple of hours a day in the summer and then give them 20-25 hours a week work so that we'll get our arms around them that way. The first jobs that kids used to get in the inner city was through the summer jobs program. Again, that's completely gone. Without that, you've got to get kids employed a little bit in afterschool stuff in the summer and then the stuff that Laurel talked about. You really want to get them the connections that Rob mentioned, too. Poor kids just don't have the connections middle-class kids have into the labor market, and we've got to figure out how broach that.

We have a small job placement program we do for older foster care kids, too. We had a job fair about a month ago where we thought we'd have 70 to 80 kids come. We had 400 kids come, and they were all nice kids. They were all well-dressed. They had to come a ways through the public transportation. The employers were impressed. We had about 70 to 80 jobs and that was it. It was a real tragedy, and these kids are just hungry [to get jobs]. You know, it's sort of build it and they'll come. [But] there's nobody building it. There are no real policies anymore to build broad systems—but then there has to be. In other words, we've just pretty much jettisoned these kids off into a life where they really don't see much hope.

ROB IVRY: Yes, I'd like to reinforce what Laurel and Jack have said about the importance and value of career development and especially paid work. I already mentioned the economic payoff for the students who went through Career Academies in terms of how it improved their post-high school earnings. But if you even go back—there's been sort of a bit of a trip through nostalgia here. We've all referenced the '70s. It used to be you referenced the '60s; now you reference the '70s. During the Carter Administration, the centerpiece was a demonstration called the Youth Entitlement Project, in which young people 16 to 19 were guaranteed jobs part-time during the school year and full-time during the summer on the condition that they stayed in school or returned to school and met certain benchmarks in school. This was implemented in 17 communities around the country, and there was a saturation program so that every eligible young person would be guaranteed a job assuming they met those conditions. One of the striking findings about this project was how it eliminated the disparity between the unemployment rates of minority kids and the unemployment rates of white kids.

When you created jobs like that, young people came in droves. They took those jobs, and it helped become a great equalizer. When you extend this to many of the other more successful projects that I alluded to earlier, the importance of paid work just cannot be overemphasized. Not only does it provide a means of financial support for young people, it's often the anchor that keeps them engaged in programs. It gives them a work history. There's nothing better than learning about work by working itself, and it helps kids get access to other jobs after they've worked. And there's also the value of the work that's been produced. For instance, the home renovations that are created through Youth Build are astonishing. Of course, the difficulty we have is that most of the major federal funding streams don't allow for paid work experience or training, or it's very restrictive. So, it takes the ingenuity of people like Laurel and Jack to figure out ways to provide those paid jobs in the absence of federal legislation.

JACK WUEST: Yes, some really creative programs were done in the 1970s. Marion Pine had some great stuff. They did really creative stuff out in Boston, Hill Spring and a bunch of people...Bob Schwartz...

The real tragedy was literally in 1980: we were looking out at the horizon. At the White House, there was a Youth Act, which was the culmination of all the research. It was \$2.0 billion in 1980 dollars and that was defeated when Carter was defeated. The Reagan administration gutted it and didn't do anything with it.

You know, you could put it politely [and call it] “disinvestment.” Or just basically pauperizing and turning inner cities areas into third world countries is what they've become. The disinvestment for youth employment—the cuts led to a loss of \$40 billion since 1981. That's across the country, \$40 billion for youth employment what should have been funded under the Youth Act. That was just millions of young people who didn't have the opportunities, which is the reason why so many young black men are in prison. An example of disinvestment is

Chicago. Their employment and training funds were \$190 million in 1980 and '81 and through the '70s. That plummeted like a stone falling into a lake and Chicago disinvestment in unemployment and training was \$6.6 billion—just left people in the inner cities high and dry.

The balancing hand on the scales of justice that governments should give and no longer does. These kids are just pretty much left high and dry, and I'm not trying to get on a soap box, but I've done this for 30 years and we do know it works. We know what kind of programs to do and I think that everybody on this phone call has to figure out how to politick their people to get them to see your programs, get measurable outcomes, make them champions to really implement what we know works.

LAUREL DUKEHART: Linda, I would like to jump in with just one more thought about expectations. Everything that's just been said—the kids get this and it really influences how they feel about their future and where they're going. I can't tell you how many young people in my program who, from a very young age, never really expected that they would graduate from high school, let alone go to college. When you talk to them about their career goals, they'll tell you that they really expected that they'd end up working in fast food. As you try to expand the horizon step by step, have them look to the future and see themselves as achieving a different kind of future, it is so amazingly inspirational to see them grab a hold of that and start to believe in themselves and then perform based on the fact that someone is showing them a different kind of future that they might have.

Yesterday, we were doing a videotape of a couple of students. We were just going along and I was interviewing this one young woman and everything's fine, everybody was cheerful, and at one point I just asked her the question, "now you're getting ready to graduate from this program. If you wouldn't have had this opportunity what do you think your life would have been like?" She got about a sentence into her answer and just burst into tears because it was so—she knew that her whole future—she had had a chance to reinvent herself for a totally different kind of future.

LINDA HARRIS: I'm glad you brought that up. We also did a survey. We're just getting the responses in and I've been going through them. We surveyed about 200 young people in the Youth Opportunity Programs who also had been out of school and have gone back into educational programs and comprehensive programs. And we found the same thing: you see very transformed young people.

You see youngsters who are going to college. Youngsters who are thinking about college. Youngsters who are thinking about things that they heretofore would not have thought about. So, I think it just underscores what each of you have said about the answers do exist and these lives can be transformed and it is a matter of policy and it is a matter of public will. I'm going to let that lead into less thought-about discussion. Ultimately, we all kind of look longingly at the '70s, knowing that resources are an issue [today]. But are there other things that can be done at the federal or state policy and legislative levels that would aid in the expansion and replication of programs to get us to the scale where it's actually making a dent in this problem that we're talking about? Rob, do you want to start?

ROB IVRY: Sure. There could be another Audio Conference session just dedicated to this question.

LINDA HARRIS: Exactly, but we've got to do it like in seven minutes....

ROB IVRY: One thing to think about is whether there is the national will that there should be an expectation that by the time young people reach their early 20s that they're all productively employed; that they've had some post-secondary education, given the economic imperative of education beyond high school these days; and that they're not involved in any kind of risk-taking behavior. I mean to try to set some ambitious goals that policy can then drive towards. No one's really articulated this as a way to unify the disparate aspects of the country around a united will that young people, as they make the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, are in this kind of situation.

I think from a legislative standpoint one of the key things is to make sure that any legislation that involves young people is enabling. In other words, there's obviously the money issue, but there's the enabling aspect of it—so that the five or six elements that I've described can all be implemented easily without this patchwork craziness that has to go on at the state and local level. The other thing I would just put into the mix here is maybe to borrow a page from the welfare reform playbook, and that is what forged a consensus there was this notion of reciprocal obligation: that if young people are productively engaged and are making progress and are avoiding risk-taking behaviors, there should be some way to reward them whether it's through paid work, through vouchers for training, through scholarships for post-secondary education—that is, to think about whether or not there's some kind of quid pro quo or reciprocal obligation equivalent that rewards positive behavior.

LINDA HARRIS: Laurel, your thoughts?

LAUREL DUKEHART: I think one of the keys—in addition to what was just mentioned about kind of the patchwork craziness, which is definitely a barrier for trying to be innovative—but I think flexibility could go a long way toward untying our hands, even without adding more money into the mix. For example, there are some states that allow K-12 funding to follow the student until they're 21. Other states, if the student drops out, that's just tough luck for them. There's no opportunity for them to go back and have another try at finishing their high school education.

Dual-enrollment regulations vary by state a lot as well. In some states, if you are a student with a "B" average or higher, you're able to take AP courses—Advanced Placement courses—for college, but it's difficult for a student in a case like Gateway to College to qualify for dual enrollment because they don't meet the thresholds. They may not have the grades. In some states, you have to be a junior. If you have dropped out of school before earning your junior year status, you are again not eligible to go back and have a second try. Some districts have a percentage: only so many students can take classes for dual credit. To me, it feels very arbitrary about why that would be true.

The final point I would make is we mentioned the No Child Left Behind Act. I think one of the probably unintended consequences of the way many states are interpreting that would preclude community college faculty from being considered highly qualified to teach courses to students in programs like mine, where they have not yet earned their diploma. In other words, a calculus instructor who's got a master's degree—and meets all the requirements for being a faculty member at a college—wouldn't have the K-12 certification in order to be considered highly qualified to teach calculus to one of our students.

LINDA HARRIS: Wow, how do you get around something like that if you want to coordinate?

LAUREL DUKEHART: Well, I think a lot of states right now are wrestling with the interpretation of that rule. Texas has just recently issued a statement that globally said in the state of Texas they're making the decision that qualified community college faculty do meet the tests for highly qualified according to their interpretation of NCLB.

ROB IVRY: Yes, that's variable across the country how that's being interpreted.

LAUREL DUKEHART: Yes.

ROB IVRY: But I agree that this is a tremendous opportunity because community colleges really are an important and viable alternative for those who've dropped out of high school—and not only in the PCC model, but other models that we've seen around the country.

LINDA HARRIS: And I think that the other thing about the community college models is that you can have both the exposure to the high school diploma certification and to the post-secondary at the same time. It really expands the horizons for young people—and in particular for older youth. The amount of time that it would take for them to travel from where they were to where they need to be academically; it's a tremendous model for how you do more engaging ...

LAUREL DUKEHART: Foreign students can also attend in the evening. There's just a lot more flexibility, and students or parents who are working need a flexible system.

LINDA HARRIS: Yes. That's an interesting point. What are the other kinds of support, apart from the academic, have you found that you've had to put in place for these youngsters?

JACK WUEST: We do a lot of support stuff. Again, the summer program is really important. There's plenty of research PPV and other groups have done on this. It's common sense: if you can do a little academic work in the summer and make it interesting so they don't backslide on their skills and then tie it into some employment.

The mentoring is really critical. Not a volunteer mentor—some call them mentors or case workers—someone who cares about a group of 20, 25 kids, if they're not too high maintenance. If they're really higher maintenance, then 10, 11, or 12 kids—but really stay with them. Get them in school. If one of my kids in the older foster care youth program is not in school at 8:30, we make sure the mentors get on the phone. Where's the kid? Go out and get him. The next day he's sick? We go check it out. Mentors carry cell phones. They'll call anytime of day or night.

Build incentives. Last year we had graduation for the young people. We had about maybe half the kids come. The other kids just sort of trailed off. This year we have 80 out of 90 kids who graduated. We're offering them \$250.00 for a certificate for new clothes, which they ought to get anyway because that's what happens when middle-class kids graduate. Any kid who graduates and goes to college from this group is going to get a laptop. These are incentives that are built in, and it gives us a chance to put our arms around some of these kids who graduated in January and even August of last year, as well as our June graduates.

But it's all going to come down to money. You've got to have enough money and then you've got to vision and design a program and do that. The federal government could offer incentive funds for school districts to do this. They could offer incentive monies for state boards of ed to do the kind of incentives that Iowa and some other states do for local school districts.

Other states I think are way ahead of Illinois in a lot of ways on this. We got lucky when Paul Vallas was the superintendent here. I got to know him as the Budget Director. He said “let’s set up some programs for dropouts.” We did it. Three years, later the bureaucracy turned against it. We had to fight them back politically and we won, but you’ve got to be vigilant in these programs with the data as well as your political champions.

The one thing we have done is we’ve broken out with Andy Sum’s help. We couldn’t do it without Andy, and other groups ought to consider this. We’ve got the data from the 2000 Census, and we can update it in each of our state legislative districts across the state. Congressional districts across Illinois. County districts in Cook County and city wards and community areas. We can show anybody how many kids are dropouts and how many kids are out of school and out of work. How many kids are jobless. Those data are the basis of the hearings we’re going to do and that will drive home the issue of the people who need it and look at it in terms of a public policy. A governmental commitment to these kids.

LINDA HARRIS: Jack, I think that you’re very right that it does become important to elevate public will. We need to elevate the status, the information. Let people know what’s going on.

I think what the Annie E. Casey Foundation did in highlighting disconnected youth is going to be very important to keeping the attention on this. Laurel mentioned the need for vigilance and the continued commitment because the coordination in doing these things is not easy.

Laurel, in your replication, you’re going to be doing this with how many additional sites?

LAUREL DUKEHART: We’ve been funded to select eight.

LINDA HARRIS: Eight. So I wish you the best of luck and we’ll be following up with you on your replication. I’m sure there are people on the call who may want to get to you.

LAUREL DUKEHART: Can I give our website?

LINDA HARRIS: Why don’t you do that?

LAUREL DUKEHART: OK, there’s a lot of information about the model and the replication at www.gatewaytocollege.org, all one word.

JACK WUEST: And our website is: www.asnchicago.org, and there’s a lot of data on there that reports about what we do.

ROB IVRY: And ours is www.mdrc.org.

LINDA HARRIS: There is so much more that we could explore, but we have come to the end of our time. I want to thank our speakers and remind the audience that if you have questions—and I’m sure there’s some things that may have been provoked with this discussion—please e-mail them to me at: lharris@clasp.org. I will get them to our panel, and I’ll try and get responses back out to you. Thank you very much to the panelists. Great discussion. And thanks to the audience for joining us. Goodbye.

[This transcript was proofed and corrected by Linda Harris and John Hutchins.]