

**Testimony before the Workforce Subcommittee of the  
House Education and Labor Committee  
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**Introduction**

America's dropout crisis has continued to receive significant attention nationally. This is the result of better data about the significant number of students not graduating on-time—only 70% nationally on average, with some schools graduating fewer than 50% of their students. Recent research has also underscored the serious social and economic impact on communities through the country.

The scope of the problem and its economic impact on Nevada is staggering. Consider the following statistics:

- Nevada's graduation rate was 67.4% for 2007-08
- 20% or approximately 43,000 Nevada youth ages 18-24 are disconnected (have not progressed beyond a high school diploma and are neither employed nor enrolled in postsecondary education)

Nevada ranks worst among all 50 states in the percentage of:

- Teens who are high school dropouts
- Teens not attending school and not working
- Young adults enrolled in or completed college

For the individuals represented by these numbers, their chances to ever be able to earn a family-supporting wage are slim, and research tells us many of them will be dependent on public systems rather than becoming contributors to the public good. Beyond the individual impact, the economic and social consequences for Nevada are grave:

- If the more than 19,500 high school dropouts from 2008 had earned their diplomas, Nevada's economy would have seen an additional \$5.1 billion in wages over these students' lifetimes.
- If Hispanics/Latinos, African-Americans, and Native Americans achieved the same education levels as Whites by 2020, Nevada's personal income would increase by \$2.2 billion.
- More than 80% of America's prison population consists of dropouts. It costs approximately SIX TIMES MORE annually to incarcerate than educate an individual.

In an effort to address these staggering numbers and resulting issues, Nevada Public Education Foundation created the Ready for Life movement to bring together youth-serving systems in a collaborative effort to ensure more Nevada youth are "ready for life."

## **Nevada Public Education Foundation's Ready for Life Movement**

Established in 1991, Nevada Public Education Foundation (NPEF) is a statewide non-profit intermediary organization working for systemic change on behalf of Nevada youth. Facilitating collaboration among public and private youth-serving organizations, NPEF brings together the **education, workforce development, and youth development systems** in order to better serve youth, particularly those most at risk of not graduating from high school and transitioning to productive adulthood. NPEF builds this connected infrastructure through its Ready for Life movement.

NPEF launched Ready for Life in 2005 as a collaborative effort to improve Nevada's high school graduation rate. NPEF's focus was driven by research from Stanford University indicating that young people who are not **connected by age 25 to either school or work** are likely to remain disconnected forever, resulting in significant personal, economic, and societal costs. This concern was solidified by local research (see [www.readyforlifenv.org](http://www.readyforlifenv.org)) showing that too many of our own students are failing to transition from high school to productive adulthood. According to the Stanford research, those most at risk of not being "connected by 25" fall into four categories: youth who do not complete high school; those deeply involved in the juvenile justice system; youth in the foster care system; and young, unmarried mothers.

Ready for Life is a statewide **movement**, a **systemic** effort to support youth; it is not a specific program or intervention, but a **facilitation of collaboration** among youth-serving organizations with the end goal of **connecting Nevada youth to education or productive employment by age 25**.

Nevada's Ready for Life movement now involves hundreds of organizations statewide, local community collaboratives, and a network of nearly 1,000 stakeholders working toward the vision that all Nevada youth are ready for life, supported by a community ethic that values education. Convened by Nevada Public Education Foundation, public and private organizations are partnering in the belief that as they work together, students will be more likely to complete high school and gain appropriate postsecondary education or training to become productive, contributing members of society. Partners include local agencies, non-profits, community-based organizations, education entities including local school districts and higher education, faith based organizations, youth, concerned parents, and elected officials.

In November 2008, the Ready for Life Nevada Dropout Prevention Summit established the **goal to increase Nevada's high school graduation rate 10% by 2013**. Recognizing common goals and collaborative processes, Nevada Public Education Foundation was excited to unite the Ready for Life movement with NV DETR's federal Shared Youth Vision partnership in January 2009. With this unique blend of public, private and non-profit leadership, **Nevada is now positioned to make sustainable systemic change** via this collaboration, with the end goal of connecting Nevada youth to education or productive employment by age 25. Through Ready for Life in local communities and statewide, NPEF facilitates:

- Creating a connected infrastructure by aligning education, workforce development and youth development to support youth

- Public and private coordination at the local and state levels, recognizing multiple systems have roles in youth success
- Cross-communication between federal, state and local work to leverage resources, remove barriers, and learn & share promising practices
- Collaborative planning and progress toward measurable goals to help youth become “ready for life”
- Building a community ethic that values education

### **Intermediary Organizations**

The following recommendations are submitted by NPEF and include significant input and feedback from workforce and education intermediary organizations across the country, including those in Portland, Philadelphia, Boston and Chicago. Facilitated by Jobs for the Future, the Boston-based research, development and policy organization, this consortium (of which NPEF is a member) has been developing and sharing best practices for systemic change to help our nation’s struggling students and disconnected youth succeed in school and transition to become productive, contributing members of society.

The work of these intermediary organizations, including NPEF’s Ready for Life Nevada work since 2005, underscores the **need for intermediary organizations** dedicated to building the infrastructure necessary for ongoing and sustainable collaboration among youth-serving systems. In order to more effectively engage youth in school and develop an educated workforce to lead our nation’s economy, investment in intermediary organizations is critical for alignment of education, workforce, and youth development systems.

### **Legislative Recommendations**

While Congress should look directly at the youth provision of the Workforce Investment Act, it must also ask a series of broader questions about how to advance a comprehensive youth strategy that include the Workforce Investment Act as one of the federal policy vehicles for improving the education and career pathways for America’s most vulnerable youth. Congress should seize this moment to align outcomes, reporting & accountability, encourage and ease the use of multiple funding streams. All these multiple federal policy vehicles, including the youth activities of the Workforce Investment Act, should ensure that all eligible youth are advancing on a clear path toward a postsecondary credential required for success in today’s economy.

The legislative recommendations are captured in the following areas:

- **Governance**
- **Eligibility, Services, and Performance**
- **Quality Improvement and Innovation**

### **Governance**

Current law authorized Youth Councils to provide coordination and oversight among a limited number of local stakeholders with respect to authorized youth activities. Today, Youth Councils must play a more strategic role.

With the support of local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs), Youth Councils must measure the needs of local youth and ensure that school districts, WIBs, higher education partners, and other key stakeholders collaborate to provide a targeted range of options to serve them.

To be most effective, WIA youth programs and activities should be part of a larger regional strategy connecting workforce, education and youth development activities. Rather than stand-alone entities working in isolation, Youth Councils must collaborate with other youth-serving systems and connect to related efforts in order to better meet the needs of local youth. As described above, intermediary organizations are highly effective conduits for this collaboration.

Congress should:

- Allow the maximum flexibility and encourage regional integration of WIA youth efforts with existing regional youth committees and/or intermediaries where appropriate, as opposed to working in isolation.
- Invest in expansion of local capacity through intermediaries and collaborations that bring together workforce, education, and youth development systems at the local, regional and/or state levels.
- Specify that representation must include an individual from the local education agency or agencies in the area responsible for secondary education; individual from at least one local institution for higher education; employers in local industries and sectors that are growing and have a high demand for skilled labor; and as appropriate local youth-related foundations and/or philanthropies.
- Establish an incentive fund for entrepreneurial WIBs and Youth Councils to adopt an expanded set of duties, including improving capacity to gather, analyze, and use data to evaluate the quality of current youth program options and increasing the supply of quality education options for in-school and out-of-school youth.
- Allow Youth Councils the discretion to direct funding toward local priorities. Such provisions should set floors on basic activities, such as in-school, out-of-school, and, as appropriate, summer jobs. A portion of funds would be directed toward high-priority purposes consistent with data analyses and investment strategies.

### **Eligibility, Services, and Performance**

WIA should focus on serving youth that are most in need of skill development services. That means retaining services for both in-school and out-of-school youth, while placing a priority on the hardest-to-serve through targeting services, expanding eligibility, and improving performance measures. Current eligibility and performance provisions pose programmatic obstacles to serving many of the youth that are most in need.

**Eligibility** - Too much time at the local level is devoted to determining eligibility, with little positive effect and in the face of new research that offers more streamlined strategies for eligibility determination. There is a need to simplify the determination of which youth are eligible to receive services.

Congress should:

- Increase age eligibility to 24. Research shows the importance of engaging youth by age 25. Congress already recognized this by raising the age for youth employment funds in the ARRA from 21 to 24.
- Permit youth who are eligible for other federal means-tested programs to be automatically eligible for WIA services.
- Make youth automatically eligible for services based on risk factors, such as disconnected status (out of school and out of work) and early warning indicators for in-school, off-track youth (e.g. over-age, under-credited, non-attendance), preferably without income eligibility.
- If income requirements are maintained, permit the use of income proxy measures (e.g., ESEA Title I, Free and Reduced lunch status, high-poverty census tracts) as automatic designation for eligibility.

**Funding** - Funding for youth activities is diffused, limiting the impact of federal efforts to raise workforce and postsecondary readiness. Funds should target off-track students within the in-school population.

To improve impact, Congress should:

- Place a priority on off-track students, including prevention and credit retrieval efforts to get them back on track to graduation and to attaining postsecondary credentials.
- Permit follow-up services that provide continuing support (e.g., from a transition counselor) after young people leave schools or programs and as they seek to enter or remain in work or further education.
- Link WIA in-school activities for youth with other relevant federal programs.

**Program Design** - WIA youth program designs and elements should advance the development of high-quality pathways that ensure eligible youth attain skills and credentials necessary for educational and career advancement. WIA youth funding should result in the development of high-quality pathways and options that lead to postsecondary credentials and career advancement for youth.

Congress should:

- Establish that the purpose of WIA youth activities is to ensure that eligible youth attain workforce skills and credentials that promote educational and career advancement, with special attention to creating employment opportunities in high-growth and emerging sectors.
- Retain the ability to allow continued funding to support eligible youth over more than one year and for a transitional period after they have left the program or school.
- Strengthen incentives for employers to train and employ, and for colleges to enroll, formerly disconnected youth who have completed WIA-funded youth programs. One example is the disconnected youth tax credit.

**Employment Programs** - Youth employment programs, including project-based learning activities, apprenticeships, and internships, should help youth attain both work-related skills and supports that can help students advance in educational attainment and achievement.

These programs should provide highly structured and well-supervised work experiences that emphasize learning and skill development. Programs should be encouraged to build partnerships with employers, who can provide work-based training and learning experiences through internships and apprenticeships.

Congress should:

- Invest in a funding stream for high-quality summer and year-round youth employment opportunities that emphasize learning and skill development as well as academic programs.
- Focus attention on educational engagement and work skills development strategies for all WIA-funded youth programs.

**Performance Measures** - Differentiate performance measurements stipulated under WIA to align with the distinct needs of varying adult and youth populations.

Under the current performance measurement system, providers often serve primarily those who are more job-ready, thus reaching a smaller proportion of the population that need services. Provide incentives in the law for programs to serve a broader range of youth. One way of achieving this is by differentiating performance measurements stipulated under WIA to align with the distinct needs of varying youth populations. Programs should be able to apply interim benchmarks that are predictive of educational and career advancement and that account for the relative difficulty of populations with multiple risk factors.

Congress should:

- For youth, adopt measurements to mark the progress of all eligible youth, particularly those who are hard to employ or low-skilled. Determining the progress of all eligible youth would require different performance measures for different segments of the eligible population.

### **Quality Improvement and Innovation**

Current law lacks any effective mechanism of promoting quality improvement and innovation among WIA Youth programs and activities. As a result, the field lacks a pool of quality models and practices that can help spur broader systemic improvement.

First, innovation and higher levels of successes should be promoted not just for national organizations with “branded” models but also for local organizations and/or partnerships that demonstrate the ability to serve particular groups well and achieve higher performance outcomes.

Congress should:

- Create an innovation fund for WIA Youth programs. Partnerships that seek to develop a new program, improve an existing program, or scale up a promising model, all toward more challenging performance outcomes, would be eligible to receive funding. The fund would be used to drive programs toward meeting challenging performance measures, including measures focused on lower-income, lower-skilled, and other disadvantaged populations.

Second, older disconnected youth, especially those with low skill levels, present special challenges. Too few successful models for this population exist. Additionally, there are too few models for the hardest-to-serve adult workers (i.e., those with multiple barriers to employment, those with the lowest skill levels, and those with limited English proficiency).

Congress should:

- Establish an investment fund to encourage social entrepreneurs to take on these challenges and invent new promising approaches.
- Place a priority on funding partnerships among community organizations, colleges, K-12 schools, employers, and philanthropy, as appropriate.
- Include funding for evaluation of these new models.

### **Conclusion**

Nevada Public Education Foundation is honored to provide input and testimony for reauthorizing the Workforce Investment Act. This legislation has been successful in helping many of our nation's young people gain work experience and skills needed for gainful employment. In today's economy, it is imperative that the revised legislation be even more strategic to provide the opportunities necessary to help our struggling students and disengaged youth succeed through collaborative, targeted and deliberate activities promoting educational engagement and work skill development that will help them graduate from high school and gain appropriate post-secondary education or training to become productive, contributing members of society.

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