

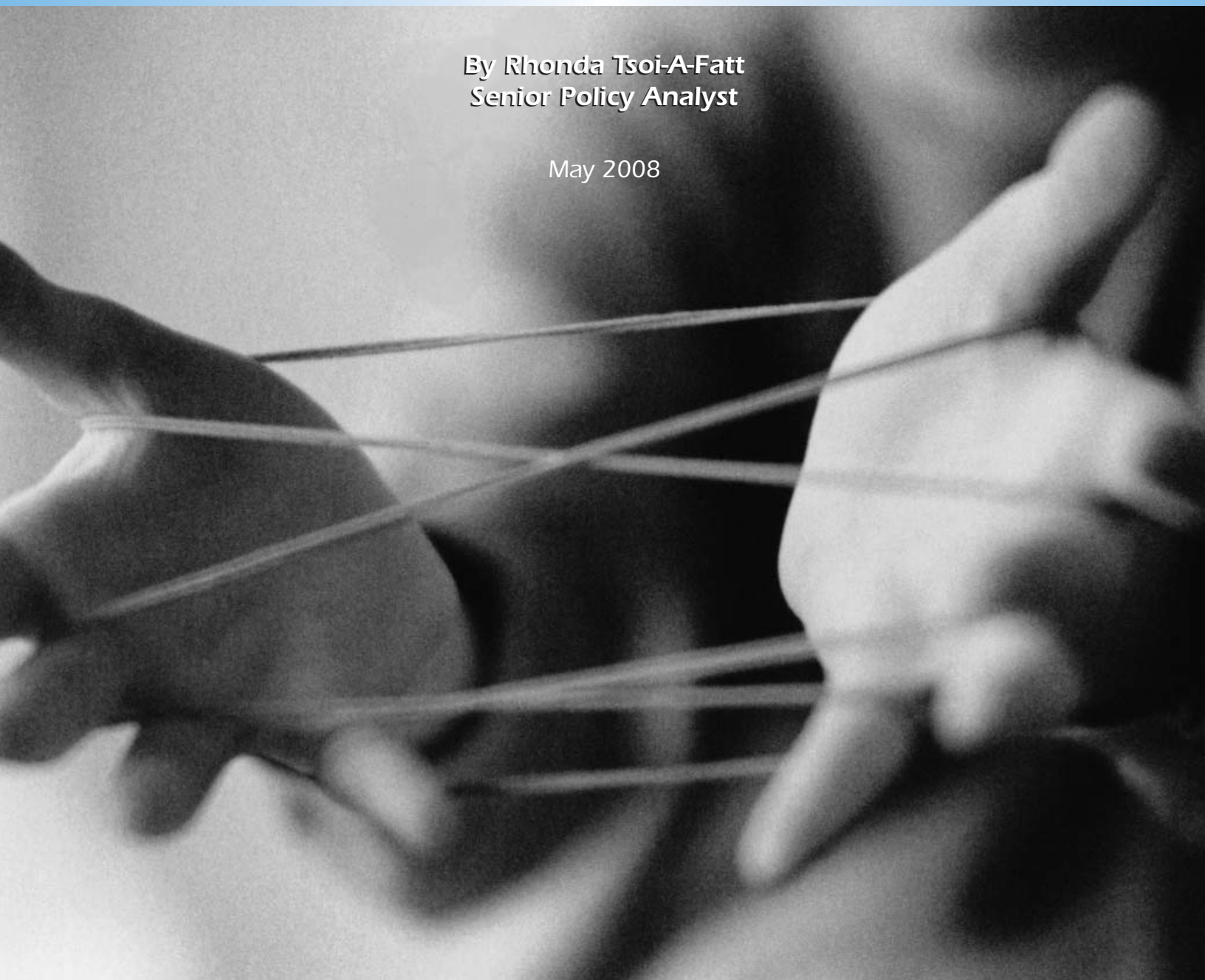
# A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY, A COLLECTIVE WORK:

**Supporting the Path to Positive Life Outcomes for Youth  
in Economically Distressed Communities**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

By Rhonda Tsoi-A-Fatt  
Senior Policy Analyst

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# CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is a national nonprofit that works to improve the lives of low-income people. CLASP's mission is to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects, and family stability of low-income parents, children, and youth, and to secure equal justice for all.

To carry out this mission, CLASP conducts cutting-edge research, provides insightful policy analysis, advocates at the federal and state levels, and offers information and technical assistance on a range of family policy and equal justice issues for our audience of federal, state, and local policymakers; advocates; researchers; and the media.

## About the Author

Rhonda Tsoi-A-Fatt is a CLASP Senior Policy Analyst in the area of youth policy. She specializes in approaches to address the high-school dropout issue. Her current work focuses on community and systemic solutions to support youth development and engagement in learning.

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**Y**oung people in poor communities are living in a state of distress. Their healthy development and progression to productive adulthood is at significant risk. They live in communities riddled with poverty and crime, where the supports needed to foster growth are either overburdened or scarce. Schools in their communities are failing, unable to effectively educate youngsters in even the most basic reading and mathematics skills. Their parents are under considerable stress as they attempt to provide for essential family needs. The lure of the street life, either gangs or other illicit activities, is ever-present. Given all of these barriers, it is clear that successful transition to productive adulthood and economic self-sufficiency is a difficult or even impossible road.

Huge numbers of young people are being lost in poor communities as they are gradually swallowed up by the risks to their healthy development. In many communities more than one in three children live in poverty—twice the national average. In the face of that poverty, these youth are almost twice as likely to be unemployed. The communities they live in have a violent crime rate that is sometimes three or four times the national average, and youth under the age of 24 are more likely to be victims of homicide. Teen girls are far more likely to become parents. The majority of schools in these communities are performing poorly, so it is no surprise that fewer than half the youth who enroll in high school graduate four years later. This detachment from school immediately diminishes the opportunities for economic stability and future life success.

In more economically viable communities, youth are afforded opportunities which nurture development and support the transition into adulthood, such as state-of-the-art libraries, museums, community centers, academic camps, children’s theatres, music schools, and athletic programs. Poor communities often lack these resources; the programs and services that are in place are strained, under-resourced, or ill-equipped to provide the comprehensive support that is needed to protect these young people from the many risks which may impede their healthy development and transition to productive adulthood.

While all children in these communities are in need of solutions to ameliorate the significant risks to their positive development and growth, this document focuses particularly on middle-school and high-school populations. This emphasis has been chosen because middle school is a critical time for educational disengagement. The combination of adolescence and concentrated poverty exacerbates the risks that youth face.<sup>1</sup> These youth are in the throes of many developmental challenges, but are less equipped to handle them than their peers in more economically stable families. In the face of these challenges, middle-school students in high-poverty communities are in sub-par schools ill equipped to provide an educational solution that keeps them engaged and learning. High-poverty schools lack the resources—human and financial—to adequately support the large number of youngsters in their buildings struggling to attend school regularly, complete coursework successfully, and manage their behavior appropriately. Under these educational conditions, high numbers of middle-school students disengage from learning. The eventual result is that they drop out of school.

Placing blame solely on the school system, however, and charging the educational structure to fix the problem of high-school dropouts is not a realistic solution. Failing schools are only one part of a broken, piecemeal community infrastructure which struggles to provide for the needs of youth within its jurisdiction. Communities must take action to protect their young people, ensuring that throughout childhood and as they pass into adulthood, they have access to the tools, resources, and activities necessary to develop positively, and to shield them from the risks that threaten their growth. No one youth-serving system can tackle this issue alone. It will take a concerted effort by all entities that touch youth to create a path toward more successful life outcomes for youth in distress. Only by rallying together in the best interest of young people can communities stem the tide of the dropout problem, and instead propel students to postsecondary opportunities and future life success.

1 Robert Balfanz, “Improving the Transition from Middle Grades to High Schools: The Role of Early Warning Indicators,” American Youth Policy Forum, presentation, January 25, 2008. <http://www.aypf.org/forumbriefs/2008/fb012508.htm>

## Creating a Community-Wide Continuum of Support

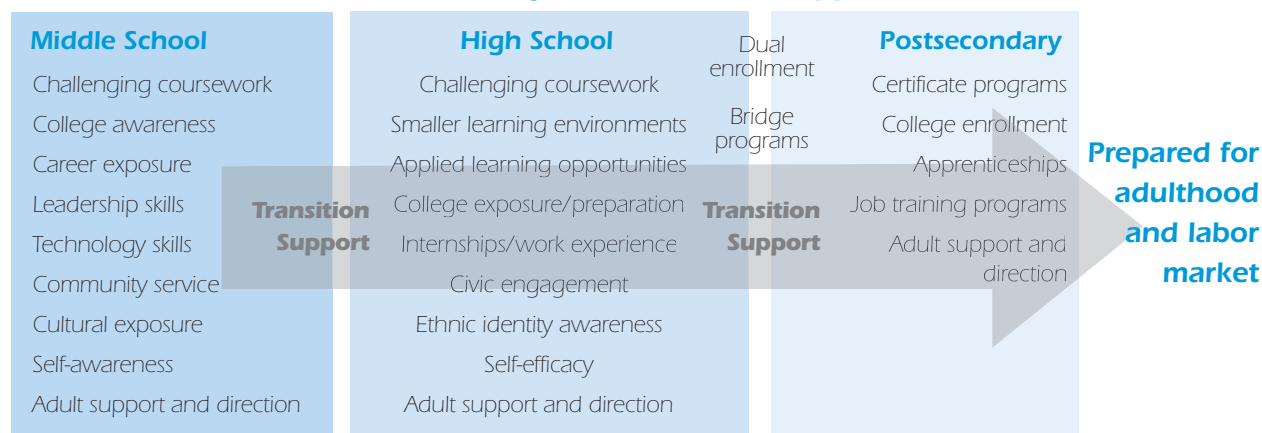
**C**ommunities of high youth distress understand that supportive activities and services broaden the horizons of young people and provide a strong foundation for their future. The struggle, however, is how to make these opportunities happen at scale, how to ensure that young people take full advantage, and how to provide supports that are robust enough to make a difference in the lives of even the most vulnerable youth. A community-wide continuum of support responds to these challenges by galvanizing all stakeholders in the community around the issue of youth, to share resources and expertise to create a web of activities and services that support all young people on the road to positive, productive adulthood.

A continuum of support is a purposeful weaving together of resources and systems to support youth in all aspects of their development toward adulthood and progression along a path to meaningful careers and eventual self-sufficiency. This is a simple, yet powerful concept which has far-reaching implications

for the youth touched by this new way of thinking and structuring of resources and services. When supports are structured in a continuum, youth in a community are able to receive a wide variety of activities and supports needed as they grow and develop. The community is also better able to identify gaps, and to respond more quickly to new needs which may develop. There are three key elements of this continuum of support construct:

- 1. The continuum must provide opportunities for youth to be continuously engaged in activities that develop their skills and abilities in multiple domains.**
- 2. Leaders from key systems and sectors must coalesce around the creation of the continuum of support.**
- 3. The continuum must connect the resources, expertise, and services of all state and local youth-serving systems.**

### Community Continuum of Support



Opportunities during school, after school, and in the summer.

## **The continuum must provide opportunities for youth to be continuously engaged in activities that develop their skills and abilities in multiple domains.**

**T**he continuum must provide opportunities for youth to be continuously engaged in activities that nurture their skills and abilities across all developmental domains—cognitive, social-emotional, physical, ethnic identity, civic, and career. Each of these developmental domains has a profound impact on academic achievement, both in terms of a young person’s intellectual ability and their attitude toward school and learning. In order to make a sustained impact on academic achievement and future life success, it is imperative that youth be supported to acquire the skills, attitudes, and values that will propel them forward. These activities and services must:

- Be age-appropriate, providing progressive skill development for youth as they grow older and their needs change
- Be aligned across the age span so that, as youth get older, they are moved seamlessly from one activity or service to the next
- Provide increased exposure to new experiences and broaden their horizons beyond their communities of distress

- Link the family, the school, and the community together to provide a wide safety net for youth
- Be attached to a “hub” or safe place for youth to go
- Be staffed or managed by consistent, caring adults able to establish positive ties with youth
- Be culturally sensitive

### **Example**

Chicago, IL – Mayor Richard M. Daley and his wife, Maggie Daley, were the drivers behind the creation and growth of After School Matters, a city-wide afterschool initiative for older youth. Through partnerships with multiple public agencies and community-based organizations, youth in vulnerable communities participate in hands-on job training in the arts, sports, technology, communications, and science. After School Matters now serves more than 20,000 young people each year.<sup>2</sup>

2 Nanette Relave and Sharon Deich, *A Guide to Successful Public-Private Partnerships for Youth Programs*.

## Leaders from key systems and sectors must coalesce around the creation of the continuum of support.

**M**ost communities of high youth distress are confronted with the challenges of high dropout rates, juvenile crime and violence, increasing gang involvement, and health and safety concerns that accompany these types of high risk behaviors. In communities across the country, there are many examples of efforts that have been enacted to address specific aspects of the youth challenge—gang prevention initiatives, community schools, enhanced summer job programs, college incentive programs, youth commissions, youth councils, and a myriad of other interventions. While the individual efforts may be laudable, this disparate and fragmented approach cannot provide interventions on the scale needed to change the landscape and move the needle on outcomes for youth in these communities.

To move communities from a piece-meal approach of youth programming to a community-wide continuum will require significant reframing and restructuring of the way youth services are defined and administered. To galvanize the community around this charge, the leadership will need to chart a course of action that is clear, concrete, and comprehensive. To be successful, the planning process will require:

### Committed leadership

A community's elected officials and other notable public figures have the decision-making authority and political clout to move systems, programs, and the citizenry in a direction that is more beneficial for young people. Leaders in key youth-serving agencies, organizations, and systems are able to vision and create collaborations that work to more effectively serve all young people. Local community-based organiza-

tions provide significant community leadership in assuring community buy-in and the delivery of services to youth. Progressive leaders in the business community play a pivotal role in the effort to invest more in outcomes for a community's youth, which will in turn affect the livelihood of the community and quality of the workforce.

### Quality Stewardship

The successful development of a continuum of support is largely dependent on the quality of the planning process. Large group efforts at strategic planning and consensus building often prove unwieldy. It is important that an entity be identified to shepherd the process. The designated convener must have credibility in the community, strong leadership skills, and ability to elevate the strategic discussion beyond individual agendas. This provides a clear structure and accountability for the work. It also ensures that necessary supports, including both sufficient organizational and staff capacity, are in place to carry the process through to completion. The convener will be charged with several tasks, including:

- Guide stakeholders to understand, acknowledge, and own the youth problem in the community, then commit to a collective solution
- Develop a mechanism for input, feedback, and buy-in for the broader community
- Define roles and responsibilities of all partners
- Consider sustainability from the beginning

### Informed Decision-Making And Collective Accountability

The goals and elements of a community's continuum of support for youth must be rooted in solid information about the youth population and the community that surrounds them. Communities of high youth distress are not monolithic. To effectively create long-term change, communities will need to invest time and resources into defining the dimensions of the problem, which will illuminate both the nature and scope of issues affecting young people. This gives the community a point from which to start. Mapping the assets in community (human, material, financial, and natural) enables new partnerships to emerge, and brings new life and possibility to planning and implementation. Accountability is key, so creating a structure for accountability will ensure that the continuum is effective and youth are indeed having improved life outcomes.

#### Example

Philadelphia, PA – Mayor John Street and his wife, Naomi Post Street, championed a Children's Investment Strategy (CIS) that has been successful for four key reasons— involvement of high-level leadership, strong coordination across agencies supported by intermediaries, creative use and sharing of funding, and data-driven methods and firm accountability measures.<sup>3</sup> The Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) and Philadelphia Safe and Sound (PSS) are key partners in this city-wide strategy. Since 1999, over 32,000 youth have benefited from PYN after-school and summer programs which link academics, work readiness, and college awareness.<sup>4</sup>

3 *Serving Older Youth Through A Comprehensive Out-of- School Time System: Lessons from the AYPF Philadelphia Field Trip*, American Youth Policy Forum, May 2006.

4 Philadelphia Youth Network, *Investing in Tomorrow's Workforce Today*.

## **The continuum must connect the resources, expertise, and services of all state and local youth-serving systems.**

**T**his continuum of activities and supports of youth must rest on a strong foundation of partnerships between the schools, youth-serving systems, and community-based organizations. In communities of high youth distress, the problems loom so large that systems may struggle to conceive the solutions. There are, however, many ways that youth-serving systems can collaborate to more effectively serve the youth population. They can improve their capacity to serve youth by sharing data in order to make more substantive decisions about services; aligning program requirements to support more integrated service delivery; making the case for increased resources to effectively serve the youth population through assessing the current supply/demand ratio for services within the community; and identifying opportunities to amend regulation to expand eligibility or use of funds.<sup>5</sup> In addition, under existing laws, many systems can develop partnerships to serve overlapping populations. There are a number of examples of state and local systems coming together to creatively serve youth.

### Example

Philadelphia, PA – In Pennsylvania, \$15 million in TANF funds are allocated to local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs). The city of Philadelphia receives a large portion of this allocation, and uses the funds to provide summer employment opportunities to 3,000 youth ages 14-18.<sup>6</sup>

### Example

Lincoln, NE – The Community Learning Centers initiative in Lincoln has a network of 19 sites providing before- and after-school programming to youth. Through a partnership with the school district, Title I funds are used to pay for curricula, site supervisor salaries, and coordination of the network.<sup>7</sup>

### Example

Macon-Bibb County, GA – Communities in Schools in Macon-Bibb County have used Workforce Investment Act funds to create a computer-based tutoring program to aid students in developing reading, mathematics, and leadership skills. Youth are compensated for completion of each tutoring module.<sup>8</sup>

5 Sharon G. Deich and Cheryl D. Hayes, *Thinking Broadly: Financing Strategies for Youth Programs*, The Finance Project, January 2007, pgs. 12-13.

6 Ibid.

7 Ayeola Fortune, Heather Clapp Padgett, Lucinda Fickel, *Using NCLB Funds to Support Extended Learning Time: Opportunities for Afterschool Programs*, August 2005, pgs. 11-16. <http://76.12.61.196/publications/usingnclbfunds.pdf>

8 Ibid.



## Conclusion

**A**ll youth deserve a chance at a viable, productive future. The fact that this future is an unattainable dream for most young people in distressed communities should be unacceptable in a country of such wealth and promise. While much attention has been focused on the need for early childhood programs, Head Start, and interventions in the early grades, there has been little focus on extending that support to youth as they navigate their middle- and high-school years. Consequently, students in communities of high youth distress display many of the early signs of academic disconnection in middle school, and drop out in alarming numbers in high school. Creating a new reality for these youth, one that delivers them to a future of hope and opportunity, will require the collaborative effort of all levels of government, all youth-serving systems, and all those working on the ground with young people each day. While this goal requires funding, that is not the only solution. It also requires that communities revamp the systems, policies, and relationships currently in place such that there is a new focus: the healthy development of all youth into strong, successful adults. Every entity in the community must rally around this cause, and come to the table prepared to contribute to a solution that provides a continuous, systemic structure of support and nurture for its young people. To build this continuum of support, communities of high youth distress need to do the following:

- 1. Elevate the Youth Challenge in a Holistic Way.** Communities will need to create an environment where all stakeholders—educators, parents, civic leaders, employers, faith- and community-based organizations—share a common concern about the life outcomes of their youth and see their role and responsibility in contributing to the solutions.
- 2. Galvanize Community Around the Challenge and Commit to Building Solutions.** Mayors, public officials, and civic and corporate leaders can play a pivotal role in sounding the “call to action” to build a continuum of support to under-gird student success and to craft solutions at scale.
- 3. Create a Forum for Visioning and Planning.** A well-structured process that engages all stakeholders can create a collective vision for the community’s youth that can reframe the thinking around possible solutions. With strong stewardship, this vision can guide the re-alignment of services, resources, and social-supports for youth, and can lead to the development of a sustainable plan of action for the community.
- 4. Address the Many Developmental Needs of Youth with a Particular Focus on Those Who Are Falling Behind.** When supports are structured in a continuum, youth in a community are able to engage in a wide variety of age-appropriate activities and receive the supports they need as they grow and develop. Youth in vulnerable situations and those transitioning among systems—child welfare, justice, homeless shelters, etc.—can be better supported.
- 5. Leverage Existing Resources in the Community.** The many financial, institutional, organizational, cultural, governmental, physical, and individual resources within the community should be used to provide a broad spectrum of opportunities, services, and supports for youth.
- 6. Establish Measures of Accountability.** Monitoring the quality of initiatives and incremental gains of youth allows communities to fairly assess the success of their continuum model, make changes as necessary, and match investments to outcomes for youth.
- 7. Be Bold.** Innovative solutions can be found by stretching the paradigms of the programs and services of the existing youth-serving systems and providers. Communities can accomplish a great deal by being open to new innovations and partnerships that will serve youth well.

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CENTER FOR LAW AND SOCIAL POLICY

1015 15th Street, NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20005

202.906.8000 main

202.842.2885 fax

[www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org)

