

Introduction to the Request for Information (RFI) on Strategies for Improving Outcomes for Disconnected Youth

The 2013 President's Budget requested new authority and funding targeted at improving services for disconnected youth. Specifically, the Budget requested a total of \$20 million in the Departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services for activities focused on disconnected youth and a government-wide general provision to implement a limited number of Performance Partnership Pilots. These pilots would grant a select group of states and localities flexibility to blend and braid Federal discretionary funding streams serving disconnected youth in exchange for strong accountability for results.

Development and Purpose of the RFI

The Interagency Forum on Disconnected Youth (IFDY) was established in March 2012 as an outgrowth of the 2013 budgetary proposals. In the short-term, the IFDY was charged with identifying how Performance Partnership Pilots would be implemented, should the authority be enacted. Performance Partnerships, which build on a strategy implemented by the Environmental Protection Agency, allow states and localities to pilot better ways of using Federal resources by giving them additional flexibility in using discretionary funds across multiple Federal programs in exchange for greater accountability for results.

As a result, the IFDY, through the Department of Education, released an RFI in June 2012 to gather information on how states and localities could use the proposed Performance Partnership Pilot authority as well as existing best practices for serving this population. The IFDY will use the responses to the RFI to assess the best use of Performance Partnership Pilot authority (if enacted) and of other resources requested in the 2013 Budget for disconnected youth.

Process for Reviewing RFI Responses

After the RFI closed for public comment on July 31, 2012, a team composed of staff from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Department of Education (ED), and Domestic Policy Council (DPC) reviewed and analyzed the comments. The RFI yielded 171 responses from a wide range of organizations and individuals, and can be broken out as follows:

- 2% Foundations
- 4% Business
- 8% Higher Education, Academia, Think Tanks, and Education Consultants
- 9% State/Local Education Agencies
- 10% Local Government
- 10% Youth and Other Individuals

- 13% Advocacy Organizations or Individual Advocates
- 44% Associations, Community-Based Organizations, Non-profits, and Unions

The RFI responses identified a list of existing policy barriers, highlighted promising ongoing initiatives and best practices, and offered recommendations for effectively serving this population and administering Performance Partnership Pilots. In order to fully digest the responses, the OMB-ED-DPC staff team summarized the RFI responses thematically (see attached Overviews document). Please note that this document represents the ideas and opinions expressed in the RFI responses. It is not a policy document intended to reflect the policies or views of the Administration or any of the Federal agencies mentioned in the responses.

Any questions on the RFI process or the Overview document should be directed to Annie Blackledge, Casey Family Programs Fellow, Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, at annie.blackledge@ed.gov or 202-245-7819.

Major Themes in the RFI Responses: Data

The RFI solicited advice on outcomes, data, and evaluation design. Specifically, the RFI asked for examples of data barriers that exist at the federal, state, or local levels; existing data collection mechanisms; effective frameworks and protocols for data-sharing, as well as how to develop them; and how communities and programs use data in decision-making.

Key Themes

Respondents who addressed data issues primarily offered perspectives on how to improve the system, rather than identifying specific barriers. The concerns identified by commenters provide concrete examples that, while anecdotal, may be symptomatic of barriers faced by the larger system serving disconnected youth. Agencies can use these examples to inform decisions about data strategy and to identify solutions to overarching problems with data access, quality, and sharing.

Solutions to data problems and best practices identified by commenters will inform the process for developing standards and requirements for Performance Partnership Pilots, should this authority be granted.

Data Concerns: Comments on data coalesced around five major areas: 1) lack of data; 2) inconsistent data definitions; 3) lack of coordination between different data systems; 4) limited understanding of best practices for data sharing; and 5) lack of accountability for data on specific subpopulations of disconnected youth.

On the whole, comments relayed that data for this population is sparse, largely due to fragmented data systems, inconsistency in definitions of at-risk youth, and challenges to cross-system data-sharing, including challenges posed by privacy or confidentiality requirements.

Solutions to Data Problems and Best Practices: Most of the 170 RFI responses provided recommendations for or examples of data collection and data-sharing efforts. Although these responses varied significantly in terms of their detail, the following themes emerged:

1. *The need to research and develop new, innovative ways to connect to, communicate with, and track the youth population.* Commenters suggested using social media for this purpose as well as other web-based tracking and data collection systems. Examples include General Equivalency Degree (GED) prep software and electronic healthcare records.
2. *The wide breadth of data available, but not utilized, for this population.* Commenters provided innumerable examples of data systems already in place for certain sub-groups of at-risk youth, which, if linked across other systems, could provide a low-cost way to track this population longitudinally and across multiple systems. For example, administrative data systems, such as Department of Education data, school data, and Unemployment Insurance

wage records, would be invaluable in tracking this population. Commenters also suggested the need to create a data-driven culture, and show how data and reporting assist in better serving youth.

3. *The need for integrated data systems.* Building off the point above, commenters suggested the need for horizontally and vertically integrated data systems, and particularly stressed the importance of longitudinal data systems. Commenters also suggested creating data clearing houses and shared databases for assessment, intake, case management, and referrals.
4. *The best ways to balance obtaining data for this population with privacy and confidentiality concerns.* As mentioned above, commenters were generally unsure of the best ways to develop frameworks and protocols for cross-system data-sharing. In describing the need for integrated data systems, though, commenters were wary of any infringements on the privacy and confidentiality of minors. Any data-sharing agreements would need strict guidelines to protect confidentiality, such as: implementing protocols to assure the security of data within the system as well as when sharing data across systems; identifying sanctions for infractions; and requiring informed consent from all who would potentially access the data.

Another, but far less discussed, topic highlighted in the RFI responses is the appropriate use of data. There was wide variety in these responses, with commenters suggesting that data should be used to determine funding, to inform program improvements and adjustments, to evaluate program outcomes, or to target technical assistance.

Takeaways

Comprehensive information on this population is often unavailable due to fragmented data systems, inconsistency in definitions of at-risk and disconnected youth, and challenges posed by privacy or confidentiality requirements to cross-system data-sharing. Solutions include the use of social media, low-cost ways to link existing systems, developing longitudinal data systems, and identifying options for obtaining data within privacy constraints.

Major Themes in RFI Responses: Evaluation

The RFI prompted respondents to suggest evaluation designs for demonstrating improved outcomes or improved cost effectiveness of Performance Partnership Pilots. The responses made clear that experience defining and using rigorous evaluations in this context is limited. Few of the strategies presented in the RFI responses had been rigorously tested. In turn, the responses were often based in theory, or referred to studies of other initiatives, and based on different assumptions about the purposes of the evaluation. Respondents tended to address components of evaluation designs, such as data collection methods or scope.

Key Themes

Respondents discussed components of both process and outcome evaluations that, taken together, may be grouped into three broad themes:

- *Purpose:* Overall, respondents expressed preference for comprehensive evaluations that collect process and outcome information in order to understand the reasons for program performance and to learn how to improve results. Respondents suggested that customized evaluations were necessary to achieve this.
- *Scope and methodology:* Respondents emphasized that the evaluation should be multi-year and measure outcomes at multiple levels. Uses of longitudinal and administrative data were among the strategies identified for gathering information. A wide range of analytical techniques was discussed, including regression and cost benefit. On the whole, respondents resisted experimental designs.
- *Appropriateness and feasibility:* Respondents cited resource limitations, data accessibility, and ethical considerations as impediments to some evaluation designs, like random assignment. Some recommended allowing a planning phase. At the same time, responses stressed the importance of rigorous evaluations –for improving outcomes for disconnected youth, for informing systemic change, and for building support for the programs.

Takeaways

The RFI responses underscore the importance of clearly articulated program goals and strategies for achieving high quality, credible and useful Performance Partnership Pilot –or other similar Federal efforts –evaluations. The grant administrators may want to consider an iterative process for ensuring evaluation designs are developed appropriately and meet rigorous standards. Initial and ongoing technical assistance may be necessary.

Major Themes in RFI Responses: Interim Indicators and Outcome Measures

The RFI prompts respondents to provide recommendations on effective approaches for improving outcomes for disconnected youth. The RFI defines “to improve outcomes for disconnected youth” as increasing the rate at which young people ages 14-to-24 who are homeless, in foster care, involved in the juvenile justice system, or are neither employed nor enrolled in an educational institution achieve success in meeting educational, employment and/or other key lifelong development goals.

Key Themes

A key theme in the 170 responses to the RFI was the need to measure interim indicators to identify best practices and rate effectiveness of programs. RFI respondents suggested that measuring these indicators would resolve two specific concerns: one, that many program evaluations simply measure how many participants achieve a specified outcome within a specified time frame. Given the differing needs of youth, this often makes it difficult to serve the most vulnerable disconnected youth. Two, evaluations may only measure achievement of one outcome – for instance, obtaining a GED – and therefore do not account for the progress a youth may have made in other areas necessary to bring him/her closer to that outcome – or far along on a different but comparable path.

Examples of Interim Indicators. An interim indicator is a marker of achievement along the road to an educational or employment outcome. Interim indicators are important for evaluating disconnected youth for the following reasons. An illustrative list interim indicators is also presented below.

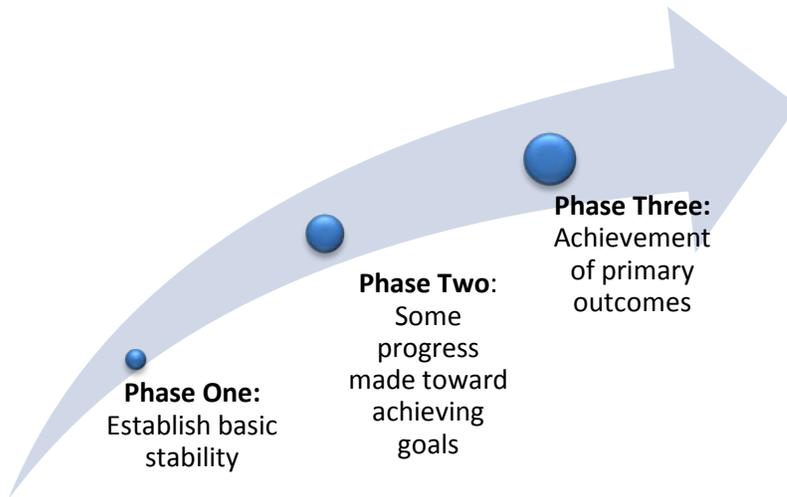
- Disconnected youth are often dealing with myriad issues that contribute to their lack of education or employment: unstable housing and/or family situations, pregnant/parenting demands, trauma and/or other mental health issues, lack of mentor or other supportive adult, and involvement in the criminal justice system. Progress on these fronts is often necessary before significant progress can be made in meeting educational and employment goals.
- The most vulnerable disconnected youth often have the most work ahead of them in order to obtain employment and/or education. For example, while it may be realistic for some youth to earn their GED in two years, for others it may take longer because their needs are greater. Interim indicators along a scale can tell program evaluators whether a program is “moving the needle” toward improved outcomes or not, even if outcomes for participants within a specified time frame aren’t uniform.
- Interim indicators are also important at the community level, both in the form of aggregate progress made by youth across a spectrum of indicators and in the level of engagement and availability of community groups. For example, one response suggested measuring community success by the number of community organizations with data-sharing agreements to track participant progress across systems. Employment and education outcomes for

program participants can also be put in a community context to get a better understanding of impact (for example, measuring employment outcomes based on the availability of jobs in the community).

Examples of Outcomes. RFI respondents were consistent in their suggested outcomes: stable unsubsidized employment and/or attainment of an educational credential that would allow them to seek employment, along with mastery of basic life skills and reduced dependency on public assistance. Many responses focused on the GED as the ultimate outcome and attendance and achievement in classes as the interim steps toward that outcome. However, several responses pushed enrollment in and completion of postsecondary education as the ultimate outcome. In practice, the desired outcome may be different for each youth.

Takeaways

Pilot projects should measure program success with interim indicators that reflect the full spectrum of youth that may be involved in the program. Examples of how this could look are below.



EXAMPLES OF OUTCOMES AND THEIR POTENTIAL INTERIM INDICATORS

Note: the interim indicators in this table and their sequencing represent a handful of examples from the RFI responses. They do not reflect any final decisions on the part of Federal agencies or the Administration to track indicators to outcomes.

Outcome	Examples of Phase 1 Interim Indicators	Examples of Phase 2 Interim Indicators	Examples of Phase 3 Interim Indicators
<i>Educational Credential</i>	Identification of appropriate educational	Enrollment in school, GED classes, or vocational program; improved classroom attendance; reduced	Attainment of GED or diploma; application to and

Outcome	Examples of Phase 1 Interim Indicators	Examples of Phase 2 Interim Indicators	Examples of Phase 3 Interim Indicators
	program; enrollment in educational program	disciplinary actions; improved academic performance (including moving up grade levels for reading and numeracy); attainment of classroom credits	acceptance by a postsecondary institution, including community college
<i>Stable Employment</i>	Assessment of workforce skills	Workforce skill development, including enrollment in, regular attendance at, and progress in, workforce trainings and subsidized employment/internships; short-term unsubsidized employment; establish source of income	Stable unsubsidized employment
<i>Life Skills</i>	Stabilize housing situation; access to health care, including mental health services; identification of mentor; child care if pregnant/parenting	Decrease in involvement with justice system; regular attendance in programs promoting reduction in risky or antisocial behavior (e.g. drug use, unprotected sex); actual reductions in risky or antisocial behavior; improved financial literacy; improved community engagement	Reduced reliance on public programs; stable home environment; drug-free

Major Themes in RFI Responses: Partnerships

The RFI solicited information on public and private partnerships. Specifically, the RFI asked for examples of successful partnerships; composition and structure of partnerships; the role of philanthropic organizations; and the opportunity to use the Pay-for-Success model.

Responses on the four themes above will inform the development of partnership requirements in Performance Partnership Pilots, should authority be granted.

Key Themes

Examples of Successful Partnerships: Nearly every RFI response provided an example of what the commenter deemed to be a successful partnership. The wide variety and detail of the responses prevents a listing of these partnerships here. However, all the examples demonstrate the importance of wrap-around services for youth and partnerships that include members of each agency or organization providing these comprehensive services, such as employers, educators and service providers.

Composition and Structure of Partnerships: As noted above, commenters provided an array of different partnership examples, each with a unique composition. Within this variety, though, the comments coalesced around four major sub-themes:

1. *The appropriate role of the federal government.* The federal government should provide funding for the pilots. However, in this constrained funding environment, federal government monies will need to be matched or enhanced by other sources of funding. Commenters also suggested that the federal government commit long-term to Performance Partnership Pilots, so that the model can be adequately tested. The federal government should also act as a convening and connecting entity. In particular, the federal government should work with philanthropic organizations to develop common metrics and a shared investment strategy, and encourage these organizations to fund pilot sites.
2. *The appropriate role of philanthropy.* Philanthropic organizations should provide funding, either where the government cannot or as an additional funding source. This funding is invaluable as both seed money and continued funding for long-term projects. Philanthropic funding can support projects that are too financially burdensome for community-based organizations, local non-profits, or agencies, such as data collection and rigorous evaluations. Philanthropic organizations also act as supporters and advocates, by working with the federal government at a high-level, providing technical assistance and advice, and conducting outreach to galvanize support.
3. *Youth involvement in partnerships.* Youth engagement is held up as a central component to effective projects. Many commenters emphasized the importance of including youth in the

planning, design and implementation of the projects and recommended a range of methods for involving them –such as youth advisory councils, youth forums and discussions groups, and youth leadership teams. Some of the most compelling responses suggested strategies that help youth develop skills and gain responsibility by empowering them in the decisions that affect them.

4. *How partnerships should be structured and operated.* Although partnerships differ in composition, commenters expressed the need for partnerships to be truly collaborative and to move beyond Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs). The Interagency Forum will need to establish criteria to judge the effectiveness of a partnership in order to include partnerships as a requirement for Performance Partnership Pilots. Commenters suggested criteria, including: joint funding and co-investment; MOUs that operate horizontally and vertically; strong organizational leadership; consistent performance benchmarks based on evidence; and data-driven decision-making. A few comments suggested that Performance Partnership Pilots should only be granted to sites with pre-existing, highly effective partnerships. Partnerships also varied significantly in terms of their structure, though the majority appear to operate at the state level. These state-level partnerships work closely with state legislatures to overcome state-level barriers to funding and program collaboration, and with philanthropic organizations to obtain additional funding.

Using Pay-for-Success: The RFI also requested information on whether or not to use Pay-for-Success (PFS) models in tandem with Performance Partnership Pilots. Under Pay for Success, philanthropic and other investors help provide up-front funding for program services delivered at the State, local, or Tribal level while the Federal government supports payments for the achievement of clearly defined outcomes, evaluations that measure achievement of outcomes, or in limited circumstances, co-investments in services.

Only a small subset of the comments addressed PFS, and these comments were split between support and wariness of PFS. Some of the responses also indicate confusion between PFS models and pay-for-performance models.

Comments expressing support for the PFS model highlight its ability to leverage additional funding, particularly from foundations. Supportive comments see PFS as an exciting opportunity to expand investment in proven models and stabilize funding for these programs.

Others comments opposed mixing PFS with Performance Partnership Pilots. These comments argue that both models are untested and linking them would be too complex at this stage. Comments noted that if PFS is used, it should not replace current funding models.

Takeaways

Respondents emphasized the importance of wrap-around services for youth and lasting partnerships that include members of each agency or organization providing these comprehensive services in a truly collaborative way.

Major Themes in RFI Responses: Alternative Pilot Designs

The RFI asked respondents to select the pilot design model that would be most effective at the community level. The request outlined three models: formula grant model, competitive grant model, or hybrid model. Respondents were also asked to recommend the duration of the Performance Partnership Pilot for the selected model.

Key Themes

The hybrid model was most often identified as the most effective pilot design. All three models were represented in the responses, however, with varying degrees of analysis. Below are brief summaries of the responses for each model.

- *Formula Grant Model:* Although a handful preferred the formula grant¹ model, respondents more often expressed concern that this pilot design model would redirect limited resources away from services for this population.
- *Competitive Grant² Model:* A few respondents believed this model would maximize flexibility and increase the likelihood that non-governmental entities would receive grants.
- *Hybrid Grant Model:* Respondents believed the hybrid model would be the most effective at the community level because it would challenge traditional systems and provide the opportunity to reconstruct service delivery to achieve better results.
 - *Collaboration:* Respondents explained that the hybrid model would allow for, and incentivize greater collaboration at the local level. Collaboration is expected to improve program implementation, get more “skin in the game,” and set the stage for wider adoption of this approach.
 - *Funding:* Respondents recommended integrating formula funds at the service delivery level, using competitive funds to support cross-agency, cross-sector alignment, and leveraging resources for technical assistance.
 - *Priority:* Some respondents proposed structuring the grant to encourage certain activities, such as blending or braiding funds, and to support communities with high need. A few recommended including a competitive preference for existing, effective partnerships.

In any case, respondents agreed that at least three years would be necessary to establish and assess the pilot program. Many recommended three-year grants with two-year continuation grants, and a few preferred longer durations, such as seven years.

¹ Formula grant programs typically award funding to States, communities or organizations each year based on specific factors, like demographic information, economic conditions, and geographic location.

² Under competitive grant programs, Federal agencies hold competitions on standard intervals (e.g., annually, biannually) and have more discretion in how funding is allocated to eligible recipients (e.g., States, localities, or non-profit organizations).

Takeaways

Regardless of the model selected, respondents seemed to make their determinations based on similar standards and shared expectations for an effective pilot design at the community level: increased collaboration, integrated and efficient program administration, flexible funding, shared accountability, and sustainable and comprehensive services for underserved populations.

Major Themes in RFI Responses: Targeted Subpopulations

The RFI prompted respondents to provide recommendations on effective approaches for improving outcomes for disconnected youth. The RFI defined “to improve outcomes for disconnected youth” as increasing the rate at which young people ages 14-to-24 who are homeless, in foster care, involved in the criminal justice system, or are neither employed nor enrolled in an educational institution achieve success in meeting educational, employment and/or other key lifelong development goals.

Key Themes

Recommendations focused on youth who may be considered disconnected primarily because of their inclusion in one or more of the descriptors listed in the definition laid out in the RFI. In many cases, respondents identified youth primarily by specific factors, or confluence of factors, that further describe their status as disconnected (e.g. pregnant or parenting young women). Respondents also suggested that safeguards be put in place to ensure resources are directed to the most at risk youth; some suggested the use of an acuity score. In nearly all cases, respondents emphasized that services must be at once comprehensive and individualized in order to meet the needs of disconnected young people.

Below is a breakdown of the primary factors that respondents used to identify, and address the needs of, disconnected youth. This breakdown points out groups that may warrant specific consideration in pilot designs, like the students with disabilities, and groups that are underrepresented in the RFI, such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth.

Target subpopulation (number of RFIs)	
<i>Identified by definition of disconnected youth</i>	
Homeless (33)	Disconnected – Education (59)
Foster Care (56)	Disconnected – Workforce (60)
Juvenile Justice (47)	
<i>Identified by factors other than status as disconnected (43)</i>	
Youth/students with disabilities (11)	Trafficked (2)
- emotional behavioral disorders (3)	African American males (1)
- developmental delays (1)	Gang involved (1)
Pregnant and/or parenting (6)	Native American (1)
Mental health challenges (5)	Drug free and felony free (1)
Runaway (3)	Undocumented students (1)
English Language Learners (2)	Transition age youth (1)
Substance abuse challenges (2)	Students living in high conflict communities (1)
Middle school students (2)	Latino (1)
Females (2)	

Takeaways

The tendency of respondents to identify populations of disconnected youth by certain factors and to structure programs based on these factors reinforces the need for flexibility at the service delivery level. At the Federal level, careful consideration will have to be given to ensure grantees are serving the most vulnerable populations and held accountable to high, achievable, and measureable outcomes.