Improving Youth Programs and Outcomes in Washington, D.C.

Martha Ross and Mala B. Thakur[1]

"No one is satisfied with the educational and employment outcomes of D.C. youth. Investing in quality improvement at the program level and building a career pathways system are essential."

Summary

In 2013, a cohort of youth-serving nonprofits in Washington, D.C. completed a self-assessment and quality improvement process led by the National Youth Employment Coalition. The nonprofits, all of which provide education, training, and employment-related services to young people aged 14 to 24, assessed themselves against a set of quality standards and identified data collection, data analysis, and performance management as areas for improvement. In response, the nonprofits developed performance improvement plans and expressed interest in continuing the dialogue about how to improve programs and measure progress toward the goal of preparing young people for employment and career advancement.

However, nonprofit organizations do not operate in a vacuum; they are one part of a broader ecosystem of funders, policymakers, and other service providers. Accordingly, this paper's recommendations to improve youth employment services and outcomes involve an array of stakeholders: Funders, public and private, and direct service providers should co-invest in performance management and quality improvement at the organizational level, and should also work together to develop a more coherent youth employment system based on a career pathways framework.

Introduction

In 2011, the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program released a report, "Strengthening Educational and Career Pathways for D.C. Youth." Its chief finding was that far too few young people in the District transition successfully into adulthood by completing high school, earning a post-secondary credential with value in the labor market, and finding employment. A related finding was that relatively few youth-serving programs could provide evidence of effectiveness. A survey of nonprofit organizations found wide variation in their ability to track participants' progress and little uniformity in the performance or progress measures used. While few would dispute the value of assisting young people —many of whom are low-income or in difficult circumstances—in improving their skills and employment prospects, it is not sufficient to only develop worthy goals. Organizations must also demonstrate that they are helping young people make progress toward those goals. But currently, there is insufficient information about the impact of programs serving youth in the District of Columbia.

Research for the report also uncovered some troubling dynamics among nonprofit organizations, employers, government agencies, and philanthropic funders. While each sector includes committed people with similar goals of helping young people, they do not always collaborate successfully and sometimes feel misunderstood, defensive, or frustrated by the other parties. And yet, these are the organizations that need to work together to develop a strong and flexible system providing youth access to education, skills development, and employment. Part of the frustration stems from the

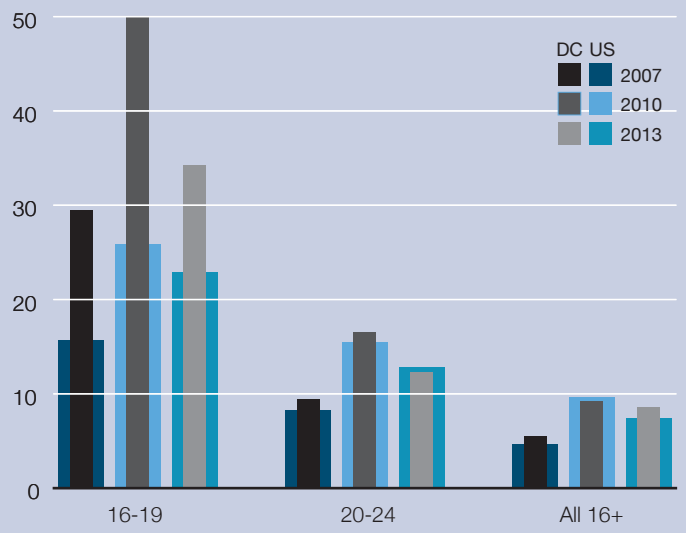
different incentives and requirements the different actors face, which drives their activities and priorities. For example, the D.C. Department of Employment Services and the Workforce Investment Council have to meet specific performance requirements tied to federal dollars, and thus they design policies and contracts with service providers accordingly. Foundations have their own sets of goals driven by their missions and board members; these goals are often related but not identical to the goals of other foundations or the government, and are built into their grants. Employers need a pipeline of appropriately skilled workers and a coordinated system to access qualified candidates but do not always have the time or knowledge to conduct outreach, recruit, and mentor young people, or to partner with nonprofits or government. (And in a recession or recovering economy, they may have fewer jobs or internship slots.) Nonprofits, as the service providers who must secure resources and blend multiple funding streams, must design programs and deploy staff—usually in the context of limited resources—to meet their own goals and the performance requirements of their funders.

What's at Stake?

Far too few young people in the District of Columbia transition successfully into adulthood by completing high school, earning a post-secondary credential, and finding employment. Data on the educational and employment outcomes of young people in the District underscore the seriousness of the problem and the urgency of the task:

- Unemployment rates among teens (16–19) and young adults (20–24) skyrocketed during the recession and have yet to recover.
- Only about two-thirds of public high school students graduate in four years.
- Unacceptably large numbers of low-income young people with lower levels of education—about 8,300, or 9 percent of all young people aged 16 to 24—are "disconnected," meaning they are neither in school nor employed.

Unemployment Rates by Age, Washington, D.C. and the U.S.



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

High school graduation rates, Washington, D.C. and the U.S.		
Year	**D.C.**	**U.S.**
2013	64%	n/a
2012	61%	80%

Sources: D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

Disconnected Youth, Washington, D.C.

Disconnected youth are young people aged 16-24 with the following characteristics:

- Not enrolled in school
- Not employed
- Low-income (in families with income less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line)
- Low levels of education (with less than an associate degree)
- Not living in group quarters (such as dorms, residential treatment facilities, and correctional facilities)

In 2013, there were approximately **8,300** disconnected youth in Washington, D.C., making up 9 percent of the total population of 16 to 24-year-olds. Of these 8,300 young people:

- 22 percent were aged 16–19 and 78 percent were aged 20–24.
- 54 percent were male and 46 percent were female.
- The vast majority (over 90 percent) were African-American.
- 25 percent had less than a high school education, 59 percent had a high school diploma or equivalent, and 16 percent have attended some college.

Source: American Community Survey microdata, 2013 1-year estimates, accessed via IPUMS.org

In response, one of the report's recommendations was that city leaders of all sectors insist on performance measurement and quality improvement, and support youth programs in building the systems and staff capacity necessary to do so. "Accountability" is deservedly a watchword, but developing consensus among providers and multiple funders on shared goals and meaningful and feasible performance measures on skills development and employment among youth takes time and commitment. Performance measures need to be carefully designed and tailored to the target group and their skill levels and needs. Interim or progress measures that signal movement toward an outcome (such as moving up a grade level in reading abilities) are not always developed or recognized. Additionally, organizations must have the information management and staff capacity to document and track performance measures as well as an understanding of the types of client characteristics that their program model is most effective in helping to reach desired outcomes. Information management capacity can refer to Excel spreadsheets or expensive specialized software, but most importantly it refers to an organizational commitment—backed up by resources—that staff will have the skills and the time to document how youth are progressing toward key skill-building and employment milestones. An organization would then use measures of youth progress and outcomes to better understand how interventions affect participants and adjust their services to better achieve their goals. For example, staff could examine whether outcomes or progress measures vary by participant characteristics, such

as gender, age, or literacy level. They can use pre- and post-tests to measure whether workshops or courses successfully impart the intended lessons or messages to participants.[2]

To help build organizational capacity among service providers, the report suggested turning to the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) as a resource. NYEC is a national membership network that works to improve the effectiveness of organizations that help youth become productive citizens. NYEC's Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet) is a system for enhancing the quality of programs that link young people (ages 12 to 25) to work and education in order to promote a successful transition to adulthood and help establish communities of practice (learning partnerships among people/organizations who find it useful to learn from and with each other about a particular topic).

The core of PEPNet is a set of quality standards drawn from research and practice. The standards reflect lessons from the fields of youth development, workforce development, and education across the country. They set quality milestones that organizations can work toward and that other stakeholders—funders, policymakers, and advocates—can use to understand program goals and track progress. And finally, they help to provide consistent language and identify quality practices and processes for improving quality based on demonstrated success.

The PEPNet Quality Standards encompass four areas:

- **Management for quality:** The foundation for program direction, systems, and operations
- **Programmatic approach:** Standards for program design and how the young person experiences the program
- **Youth development competencies:** What youth need to know and be able to do to successfully transition to work and adulthood, and how to help them gain those skills
- **Focus on youth results:** Measuring, documenting, and reporting youth outcomes and progress toward those outcomes

In PEPNet's Quality Self-Assessment, a team of staff, youth, board members and stakeholders from an organization rate the organization in relation to the quality standards, identify areas for improvement, and develop quality improvement plans. Organizations across the country, both public and nonprofit, have adopted the standards, and NYEC has led cohorts of nonprofits in several communities in undertaking the Quality Self-Assessment process together to form a community of practice. The 2011 Brookings report recommended that the District government and local philanthropic organizations support such an effort locally.

Washington, D.C. Organizations Take on the Challenge

In late 2012, three funders and NYEC announced they were seeking letters of interest (LOIs) from youth-serving organizations to participate in the DC Metro Area Communities and Systems PEPNet Collaborative (DC PEPNet Collaborative or Collaborative). The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region, the United Way of the National Capital Area and the District of Columbia Workforce Investment Council joined forces to support NYEC in leading District-based youth-serving organizations through the PEPNet Quality Self-Assessment Process. Working closely with the funders, NYEC issued the request for LOIs and managed the selection process. The request included the DC PEPNet Collaborative's nine-month timeline and asked organizations to describe their interest and ability to devote staff time to identify organizational strengths and challenges and to participate in a quality improvement process.

Objectives of the DC PEPNet Collaborative:

- To assist in building the capacity of the local organizations, through an orientation to comprehensive quality standards, organizational self-assessment, improvement action planning, and peer-to-peer network building and information sharing
- To identify technical assistance, professional development/training, and/or additional capacity needs based on information from the assessments
- To aid in growing and fostering a culture of continuous improvement among participating youth-serving programs and systems
- To develop additional group-specific objectives in partnership with the participating organizations
- To create a local community of practice
- To identify best practices and celebrate organizational success

Eleven organizations submitted LOIs, and all were accepted. During the course of the Collaborative, however, there was significant attrition when organizations could not meet the time commitment required to participate. The six organizations that completed the process included Covenant House Washington, Latin American Youth Center, Sasha Bruce Youthwork, Inc., The Urban Alliance Foundation, Inc., Year Up - National Capital Region, and the YWCA - National Capital Area.

The funders and NYEC also organized a separate cohort, the Funders Learning Group, which participated in a process parallel to the nonprofits. The Learning Group convened public and private funders of local youth service providers to strengthen their understanding of the PEPNet Quality Standards, learn about how funders in other jurisdictions used the Quality Standards, and consider how they could more effectively support youth-serving organizations in order to improve outcomes for young people. Participants in the Learning Group included the Community Foundation, United Way, the D.C. Workforce Investment Council, the D.C. Department of Employment Services, D.C. Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, the Office of the D.C. Deputy Mayor for Education, D.C. Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation, and Venture Philanthropy Partners.

Nonprofit organizations identify performance management and measurement as issues to address

The DC PEPNet Collaborative launched in early 2013 with the aim of helping youth programs learn about research-based standards of program quality and improving how they measure, utilize, and document performance outcomes. Participating organizations completed a comprehensive organizational self-assessment, identified priority areas for improvement, and developed Improvement Action Plans. Additionally, in the longer term, organizers hoped that the collaborative and the accompanying Funders Learning Group would bring greater attention, focus and resources to the issue of quality improvement, thus supporting organizations in providing more effective services and ultimately leading to improved youth outcomes. Quality assessment and performance improvement are not one-time efforts; those organizing and participating in the Collaborative well understood that the initiative needed to be part of a longer-term process in order to make a difference. For some organizations, the collaborative fit within and built upon other capacity building and performance measurement efforts; for others, it jumpstarted the quality improvement process.

The cohort of nonprofits participated in a series of trainings facilitated by NYEC to learn about the PEPNet Standards and prepare for the Quality Self-Assessment (QSA), the heart of the process. The QSA is a survey based on the four categories of quality standards mentioned above (management for quality, programmatic approach, youth development competencies, and focus on youth results). The QSA is completed by staff, youth participants, board members, and other stakeholders. While staff completes the entire survey, other constituencies (youth, board members, and stakeholders) were given an abridged version featuring questions relevant to that particular group. For example, youth

participants were not asked about an organization's financial management practices. Respondents assess the extent to which the organization or program consistently meets a given standard on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 10 (completely). For example, a respondent would rate itself against the following statement from the Programmatic Approach category: "The organization/program works with employers to connect youth to work experiences, work-based learning and employment opportunities."

Notably, the QSA is a self-reported assessment; it is not an evaluation and does not measure performance. Rather, the standards distill lessons from research and practice about what works to link young people to education and employment. The PEPNet QSA is designed to begin a reflective conversation about quality and continuous improvement. By using the QSA to compare themselves against the standards, organizations can identify areas of strength and improvement, and concentrate their resources on ensuring that their programs are based on best practices.

Results from the Quality Self-Assessment

After completing the QSA, each organization received an analysis from NYEC of its specific results, including strengths and areas for improvement. NYEC also produced a summary analysis that aggregated the responses together from the six participating organizations. The following description is based on the aggregate analysis.

Organizations assessed themselves as strong in two areas.

- **Programmatic Approach.** This category addresses questions of program design: Who are the target participants? How do they learn? What motivates them? What kinds of services are appropriate? What kinds of organizations are appropriate for partnerships and referrals? In particular, organizations rated themselves highly in recruiting and enrolling youth who benefit from program services, designing appropriate activities, and developing referral linkages
- **Youth Development.** This category addresses the question of what young people need to know and be able to do to transition successfully to adulthood. Specifically, PEPNet identifies five key competencies: working, academic learning, connecting, leading, and thriving.[3] In particular, organizations rated themselves highly in developing relationships between youth and caring adults, providing youth with opportunities to work cooperatively with others, providing youth with opportunities to progress toward recognized academic credentials, and supporting youth in developing independent living skills.

These findings indicate that the six organizations have a high degree of confidence in their ability to develop program offerings that align with each organization's mission and provide youth with opportunities to develop skills that are needed for successful transition to adulthood. However, as the organizations would be the first to point out, it does not signify there is no room for improvement in these areas.

Organizations did not rate themselves as highly in the following area:

- **Focus on Youth Results.** This category addresses standards for performance measurement, and measuring, documenting and reporting progress measures and outcomes.[4] PEPNet includes the following standards in this category:
  - *Working outcomes* (attaining an employer-validated work readiness credential, placement and retention in unsubsidized employment)
  - *Academic learning outcomes* (increased literacy or numeracy skills, earning a GED or high school diploma; entering and persisting in post-secondary education or occupational training, earning a post-secondary degree or occupational credential)
  - *Productive engagement outcomes* (working and/or enrolled in school)
  - *Program-specific outcomes* (determined by a given organization's mission and focus)
  - *Working progress measures* (developing academic and career plans, searching for a job, maintaining a job, gaining skills related to in-demand occupations)
  - *Academic learning progress measures* (increased or re-engagement in school, increased literacy/numeracy skills, increased grade point average, advancing a grade level, completing high school requirements relevant to educational/career goals, entering and persisting in post-secondary education or training, completed post-secondary education or training.)
  - *Other youth development progress measures* (increased competencies in relationships, personal responsibility, and independent living skills)

Staff had relatively high rates of "don't know" responses to survey questions in this category. "Don't know" responses may indicate a lack of familiarity of staff with performance measures, employees who are new to the organization, and/or a need for staff to better understand their roles and responsibilities related to data collection and reporting. The high rates of "don't know" responses in this category coupled with the lower ratings indicate the need for more attention and training about the progress measures and outcomes that organizations are tracking and how to collect data.

Quality improvement plans

After completing the QSA and debriefing with NYEC and senior staff, participating organizations developed improvement plans based on priority areas identified by the QSA. Examples of action steps within the improvement plans included:

- Convene a staff retreat to discuss opportunities for professional development expansion,
- Increase the number of staff able to administer assessments of literacy and numeracy skills among participants,
- Develop a list of professional development topics relevant to staff and a schedule for trainings (to be run in-house and with partner organizations), and
- Collect feedback more systematically from youth participants.

Discussion and Recommendations

The DC PEPNet Collaborative used the PEPNet standards as an educational tool among service providers, funders, and government agencies about best practices in program design and management. Best practices themselves, of course, are a means to an end: the ultimate goal is to improve skills and employment outcomes for District youth.

Based on the themes that emerged from the PEPNet Quality Self-Assessments and the related discussions during the DC PEPNet Collaborative, this paper makes two recommendations, one related to investing in performance management and quality improvement at the organizational level and the second to developing a more coherent youth employment system.

Invest in quality improvement at the organizational level

Stakeholders should continue to remain engaged in a variety of capacity-building efforts, specifically around data, performance measurement, and performance management. "Stakeholders" here refers to nonprofit organizations providing services to youth, philanthropic funders, and local government, which acts as a direct service provider, funder, and policymaker. "Performance management" refers to the act of defining goals, measuring progress and outcomes, and using that information to guide management and programmatic decisions to improve services and outcomes. "Performance measurement" is a category within performance management, and refers to measuring, documenting, and reporting progress measures and outcomes.

Two new local initiatives are examples of such capacity-building efforts.

- The Youth Workforce Leaders Academy, supported by the Greater Washington Workforce Development Collaborative at the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region, is a peer-to-peer learning community for staff of organizations providing workforce development services to District youth aged 16-24. Informed by lessons learned from the DC PEPNet Collaborative, it is coordinated by the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates and the Institute for Educational Leadership will provide technical assistance to participants. Fifteen organizations have been selected to participate, and it will last approximately one year. Specific topics will depend on the interests and learning needs of the participants, but proposed topics include career exploration, engaging youth, supervising and supporting staff, working with different youth populations, and performance management.
- Measure4Change, organized by the World Bank Group and the Urban Institute, is a pilot program to build performance measurement and evaluation capacity among nonprofit organizations in the Washington metropolitan area. Four organizations that provide a wide variety of social services are participating in the first year; they will receive a small grant, knowledge briefs on specific

topics in nonprofit performance measurement, and one-on-one technical assistance.

Local funders are to be commended for supporting these efforts, as are the participating nonprofits. However, capacity-building and quality improvement among youth workforce development service providers is an on-going process, and the status quo demands a continuous and targeted focus on data and performance management. The Leaders Academy will focus on performance management as one topic among many, and Measure4Change is targeted to organizations providing a wide range of services, not necessarily those focused on helping youth improve their skills and employment outcomes.

1. **Public and private funders should support a community of practice for service providers to improve their ability to use data for learning, self-evaluation and ongoing improvement.** Most youth employment service providers are well aware of the power of data, but on any given day data-related tasks are vulnerable to being outranked by more immediate programmatic priorities. Organizations can find it difficult to direct resources toward data and evaluation, since it usually competes with service delivery. Establishing a community of practice can provide designated time and space for staff from multiple organizations to share questions, concerns, and ideas about how to assess whether an organization or program is achieving its desired results.[5]

   Although the community of practice would still be vulnerable to the "not enough time for data" problem, that can be addressed in several ways: 1) service providers make an organizational commitment to support their staff's professional development related to collecting and using data, and 2) funders financially support the community of practice in at least two related ways: a) funding a person or organization to manage the logistical and outreach activities associated with the community of practice, ideally a person or entity with the content knowledge to guide the learning agenda, and b) providing funding to bring in outside experts and technical assistance as appropriate.

   The group should consider performance measures and outcomes as they relate to their own organizational goals and the needs of the city's young people, as well as resources and cost-effective ways to support collection, analysis, and use of data. The community of practice should provide a venue for training—customized to organizations' particular questions and concerns—about data collection, analysis, and application for program improvement. It should connect with other local data initiatives such as the State Longitudinal Educational Data System (SLED) developed and housed at the DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education and the cradle-to-career partnership RAISE DC, to ensure that the measures and software systems used by various organizations are as inter-operable and compatible as possible.

   The group should look at the full mix of elements within performance management: who is being served, what outcomes should be achieved, what services and supports are required to achieve the outcomes, the estimated length of time to reach the outcomes, and the estimated costs associated with providing the services and supports to achieve the outcomes. One potential initial activity is to catalogue the outcomes and progress measures that programs document and report regarding youth employment and skill-building, broken out by populations served (ie, high school students or out-of-school students). Such an inventory allows for a more informed discussion about appropriate progress measures and outcomes, data availability and quality, and how programs ensure that their services are aligned with the desired outcomes.

   The launching of the data community of practice should be coordinated with other local efforts to avoid duplication and confusion, such as the Youth Workforce Leaders Academy and Measure4Change, since they have overlapping topics and participants. It may be that the data community of practice could grow out of these initiatives. Or it may be that they can co-exist, by focusing on different learning needs of youth-serving organizations. The community of practice should also be coordinated with RAISE DC, particularly its Youth Employment and Disconnected Youth Change networks.

   One question is whether the community of practice should be open to both public and nonprofit service providers. Public agencies such as the D.C. Department of Employment Services wear two hats: they provide direct services as well as fund and oversee nonprofit organizations that provide direct services. An argument in favor of their participation is that as

direct service providers, public agencies stand to benefit as much as nonprofit organizations. Additionally, a greater understanding of how to use data in the service of performance management and program improvement could increase their effectiveness as funders. Although nonprofit organizations may be reluctant to be candid about their internal operations in front of staff from agencies with oversight responsibility of grants or contracts with the nonprofits, this may be a surmountable problem, leaving joint participation by public and nonprofit agencies a viable option.

Lastly, there is the question of the necessary organizational infrastructure to support ongoing learning and capacity-building within the field. The DC PEPNet Collaborative was a one-time, time-limited, investment in capacity-building. The Youth Workforce Leaders Academy is also time-limited, but it may be that the DC Alliance for Youth Advocates as the coordinating entity will develop capacity that can be sustained to support professional development and peer learning. The issue of how to institutionalize capacity-building efforts is a serious one and demands a response tailored to local conditions and assets. At a minimum, there need to be qualified staff and organizations to facilitate and organize such an effort. In some communities, a local organization plays this role as an intermediary. Local intermediaries serve as conveners, help to expand and build knowledge, offer and/or organize training, and assist with developing accountability and evaluation systems. In addition, if a community of practice is established, members of this community could work in partnership with an intermediary to facilitate and/or deliver training together. In this way, the District could cultivate a cadre of leaders through the community of practice and help to sustain capacity-building efforts and leadership.

Develop a more coherent youth employment system

Individual nonprofit organizations do not operate in a vacuum. They are one part of a broader ecosystem of funders, policymakers, and other service providers. Foundations, government entities (as direct service providers, policymakers, and funders) and nonprofits all interact with each other and are affected by each other's actions. Nonprofits design and operate programs in accordance with their missions and the funds they are able to raise, primarily through individual donations, philanthropic grants and contracts with public agencies. The funding priorities and mechanisms of foundations and government agencies thus have a major impact.

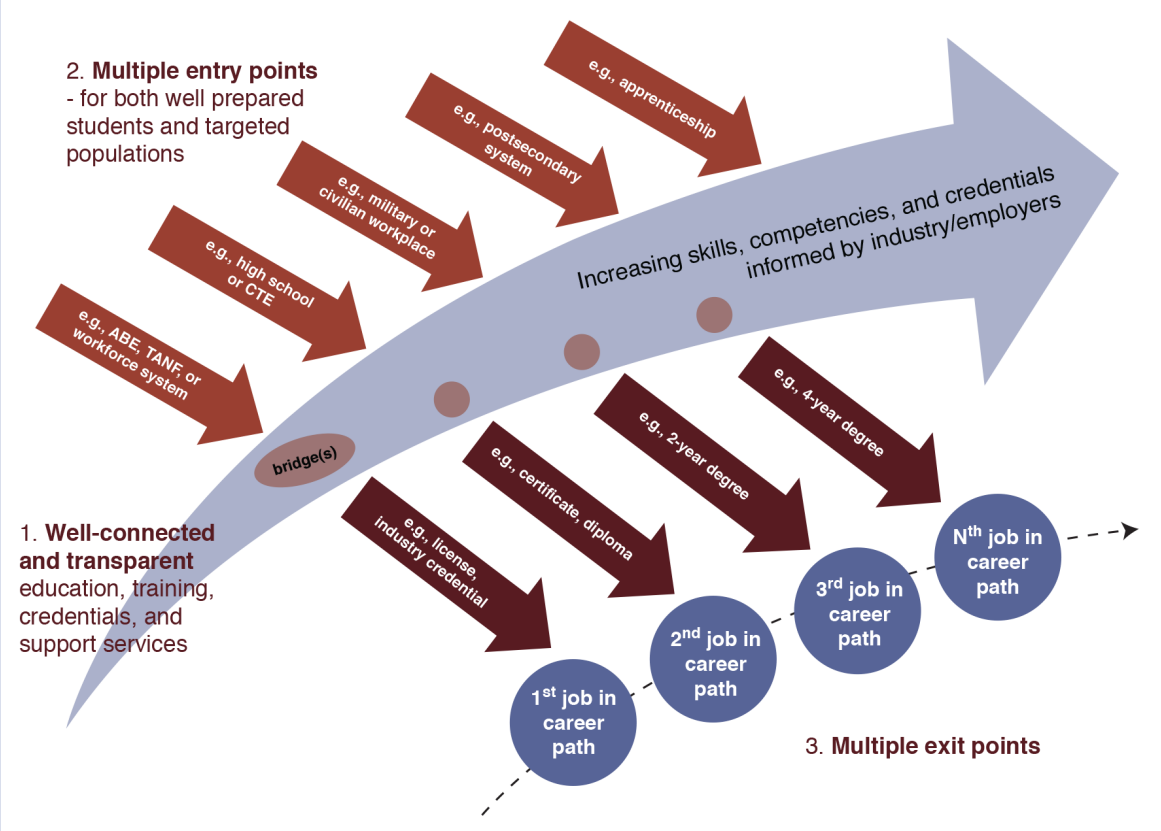
One of the tensions that emerged in the group discussions related to the misalignment between what funding sources will support and what young people need. A given young person may need supportive services such as counseling, child care, or housing in addition to or before he or she can commit to training and job searching. He or she may have reading and math skills below what is necessary to qualify for or succeed in occupational training or post-secondary education. And yet nonprofits may find that they do not have a funding stream for supportive services or remedial education, and thus are unable to provide the most appropriate services. No single nonprofit organization has to be all things to all people, and in such cases, organizations typically try to refer a participant to another organization. However, there has historically been no process to ensure that the nonprofit and public sectors, between them, offer the continuum of skills, employment, and supportive services young people may need, so there may not be a program or sufficient slots within the city. And in practice, programs are rarely structured so that the completion of one program leads to entry into the next in a sequence. (It should be noted, however, that RAISE DC is beginning to take a more systemic, cross-sector approach to improving youth outcomes in the District with its collective impact framework, which should help address this problem.)

2. **Practitioners, funders, and policymakers should develop a career pathways strategy among nonprofits, government, educators, and employers to provide progressive levels of education, training, and support services to prepare young people for employment and career advancement.** It is an opportune moment to develop a more coherent youth employment strategy, given that the D.C. Workforce Investment Council (WIC) is convening an Adult Career Pathways Task Force with similar goals. (The WIC is a federally-mandated entity charged with setting workforce development policy and overseeing workforce programs in the District.)

   The framework developed by the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways is at the base of the

WIC's Task Force, and this framework can also be used to develop a similar approach to connect young people with better education and employment opportunities. Career pathways strategies incorporate three features: a) multiple entry points, both for those who are well-prepared and those with limited skills or low levels of work readiness, b) well-connected and transparent education, training, and support services within the context of specific occupational or industry-based career opportunities, and c) multiple exit points at successively higher levels of skills or more senior employment opportunities.[6] See Figure 1 for a graphic depiction of such a strategy.

Figure 1. Essential Features of a Career Pathways System



Source: CLASP, "Shared Vision, Strong Systems: The Alliance for Quality Career Pathways Framework Version 1.0" (2014).

Guide to acronyms in the entry point arrows: ABE = Adult Basic Education; TANF = Temporary Assistance to Needy Families; CTE = career and technical education

In developing the career pathways strategy, stakeholders should consider the needs of District youth regarding education, skill-building, employment preparation, and supportive services, and compare those needs to the services nonprofits and the government are currently providing. Are the programs in line with what research and experience say about effective program design? Are there enough slots? Is there enough funding? Where are the gaps? Are there opportunities to coordinate funding and programs more effectively? The most important step is to decide how to address the gaps, which would likely involve increasing capacity among public and nonprofit service providers and reallocating or increasing funding to ensure there is adequate support for the various services and programs.

By its nature, this recommendation focuses on the interaction of multiple entities in the interest of improving how they work together, which means in practice that the responsibility for this task falls

on no one specific entity. A task force or collaborative effort led by such entities as RAISE DC, the Workforce Investment Council, and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education could be the appropriate vehicle. Participants should include representatives of nonprofit service providers, government agencies, private funders, and employers.

As noted above, the DC WIC is leading the Adult Career Pathways Task Force, which was created by the District's FY 2015 Budget Support Act and is charged with developing a city-wide strategic plan to connect basic skills programs serving adults with low literacy and math levels to career pathways leading to strong employment opportunities within targeted industries and occupations. The task force is scheduled to produce a final strategic plan in June 2015. There may be advantageous efficiencies to developing the youth and adult strategic plans in coordination with each other. Low-skilled adults and youth tend to be served by different organizations supported by different public and private funding streams, but both adult- and youth-serving programs grapple with difficulties in providing progressive levels of education, training, and support services to prepare their students for employment and career advancement. A career pathways framework can not only improve services for youth and low-skilled adults, but also help the city develop a stronger workforce.

Conclusion

Workforce development and education for disadvantaged youth and young adults are drawing national as well as local attention. In the summer of 2014, President Obama signed into law the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which will provide opportunities to expand employment, training, and education opportunities for District youth. WIOA prioritizes services to disadvantaged youth, simplifies income eligibility requirements, and expands the age limit for services for out-of-school youth to age 24. It emphasizes work-based learning and longer-term solutions such as career pathways to help under-prepared youth earn post-secondary credentials that increase their ability to find jobs enabling economic self-sufficiency. It also offers opportunities to develop performance measures to better recognize and measure employment and educational progress over time.

WIOA's focus on career pathways and better performance data align well with the themes of the DC PEPNet Collaborative and the recommendations in this paper. As WIOA implementation begins in the next two years, local stakeholders have a chance to use the new federal provisions in conjunction with local efforts around quality improvement and building career pathways to improve youth outcomes.

Quality improvement and building a more coherent youth employment system are not one-time activities and require an ongoing commitment from all stakeholders. The DC PEPNet Collaborative was an important step, as are newer initiatives such as Youth Workforce Leaders Academy and Measure4Change. However, these are discrete and time-limited initiatives. They do not signify that funders, service providers, and government have committed themselves to working together systematically to achieve excellence in service provision as a means to improving youth skills and employment outcomes. No one is satisfied with the current educational and employment outcomes of District youth. This dissatisfaction should drive continuous and ongoing efforts to measure and improve program quality and to build viable career pathways, and these priorities should be incorporated into program design and funding. Funders and practitioners need to make deliberate and sustained investments in infrastructure, tools, and human capital to ensure that measurement and data are integrated into quality programs.

For an organization to become truly performance-driven, everyday actions need to be linked to program design and to targeted outcomes. Staff who are running programs and collecting data need to understand how their activities are linked to outcomes and should be supported in these efforts. This can be a profound cultural shift within an organization. It is not achieved by simply tacking on additional measurements on top of existing programs. Performance management should not sit at the side of an organization; it needs to be embraced from the center and radiate outwards. It requires continuous investments. Absent such continuous efforts, every few years a new "capacity-building initiative" will emerge that operates largely in isolation from other efforts, starts from scratch, and represents a tremendously inefficient use of energy, talent and resources.

Endnotes

1. Martha Ross is a fellow in the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program. Mala B. Thakur is currently a consultant and formerly the Executive Director of the National Youth Employment Coalition.

2. The book *Leap of Reason* includes a story of how a staff member at a youth-serving nonprofit discovered that the domestic violence material in a parenting class was having the opposite of its intended effect. By analyzing participants' pre- and post-tests, staff determined that after completing the parenting program, participants were more likely to believe that domestic violence was an appropriate expression of love. They consulted with domestic violence experts and revised the programming to separate the genders for these discussions to allow participants to feel more comfortable expressing their views. Subsequently, the programming on domestic violence had the intended effect on participant attitudes. Source: Isaac Castillo, "First, Do No Harm . . . Then Do More Good." In Mario Morino et al, ed., *Leap of Reason: Managing to Outcomes in an Era of Scarcity* (Washington, DC: Venture Philanthropy Partners and McKinsey & Company).

3. Competency entails having the knowledge, skills and abilities to be successful in the following domains: working (exploring careers, searching for a job, and employability skills); academic learning (at least basic literacy and numeracy skills, as well as critical-thinking and problem-solving skills); connecting (establishing positive social relationships); leading (developing personal responsibility and civic involvement); and thriving (achieving physical and emotional well-being). Source: National Youth Employment Coalition,"PEPNet Guide to Quality Standards for Youth Programs: Linking Youth to Work and Education for a Successful Transition to Adulthood" (2005).

4. PEPNet defines "outcomes" as the following: "Benefits or changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, behavior, condition or status experienced by individuals during or after participation in a program. An outcome is a measurable end results. "Progress measure" is defined as "Incremental steps, improvements or changes young people make toward achieving a desired outcome or youth development competency during or after participation in a program. A progress measure is not an end result, but a step toward it." For example, regarding the GED, an outcome would be passing the exam, and progress measures would be attending GED preparation classes and passing practice exams. Regarding employment, an outcome would be obtaining a job and retaining it for at least 30 days, while progress measures would be completing a resume, submitting job applications, conducting practice interviews, or finding an internship. Source: National Youth Employment Coalition, "PEPNet Guide to Quality Standards for Youth Programs."

5. Etienne Wenger, Beverly Trayner and Maarten de Laat, "Promoting and Assessing Value Creation in Communities and Networks: a Conceptual Framework," Rapport 18, Ruud de Moor Centrum, Open University of the Netherlands, 2011.

6. CLASP, "Shared Vision, Strong Systems: The Alliance for Quality Career Pathways Framework Version 1.0" (2014).

Acknowledgments

The Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program gratefully acknowledges the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation for its generous support of this research.

The authors also acknowledge the dedicated organizations and staff members who participated in the DC PEPNet Collaborative, who work every day to improve youth outcomes in the District of Columbia. They also thank the funders of the collaborative: The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region, the District of Columbia Workforce Investment Council, and the United Way of the National Capital Area. They also thank Brookings colleague Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, who provided high-quality and timely data analysis.

Lastly, they also thank the reviewers who graciously reviewed drafts of the paper and offered valuable insights and feedback: Susan Curnan, Glenn Eagleson, Celine Fejeran, Allison Gerber, Kermit Kaleba, Lori Kaplan, Alan Melchior, Benton Murphy, Sarah Oldmixon, Gerren Price, Alice Rivlin, Maggie Riden, Marc Schindler, Patty Stonesifer, Laurie Wingate, and Mary Winkler.

For More Information

Martha Ross
Brookings Institution
Fellow
Metropolitan Policy Program
mross@brookings.edu

Mala B. Thakur
Education and Workforce
Strategist
malat990@gmail.com

For General Information

Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings
202.797.6139
www.brookings.edu/metro

1775 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington D.C. 20036-2188
telephone 202.797.6139
fax 202.797.2965

The Brookings Institution is a private, nonprofit organization. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research, and based on that, provide innovative, practical recommendation for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendation of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s) and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.

Brookings recognizes that the value it provides to any supporter is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment, and the analysis and recommendations are not determined by any donation.

About the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution

Created in 1996, the Metropolitan Policy Program provides decision-makers with cutting-edge research and policy ideas for improving the health and prosperity of cities and metropolitan areas, including their component cities, suburbs, and rural areas. To learn more visit: **www.brookings.edu/metro.**

BROOKINGS

1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington D.C. 20036-2188
telephone 202.797.6000
fax 202.797.6004
web site www.brookings.edu

Metropolitan Policy Program
at BROOKINGS

telephone 202.797.6139
fax 202.797.2965
web site www.brookings.edu/metro