



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL POLICY MAKERS

From: The JAG *National Thought Leader Event*

“SETTING THE NEXT AGENDA FOR AT-RISK YOUTH”

EDUCATION AND JOB SUCCESS

BACKGROUND

Over the past four years, five “*National Thought Leader Events*” have been convened by a unique group of organizations with decades of experience in working to find *solutions* – both academic and economic – for high-risk youth.

The **National Urban League**, the **National Council of La Raza**, the **Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute**, the **Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies**, and the **Congressional Black Caucus Foundation** have joined with Jobs for America's Graduates in the development of a series of intensive working events to identify solutions “*proven to work, at scale and over time.*” These solutions offer legislative, programmatic, and administrative guidance to State and federal officeholders to meet one of the most intractable challenges that have faced the American economy and society – the great disparities of economic and academic success for at-risk youth, and especially for high-risk minority youth.

Organized into a series of intensive working sessions, through Panels and Roundtables, the *National Thought Leader Events* have each assembled 100 experts drawn from the public and private sectors. These leaders have demonstrated consistent expertise and proven success in overcoming the barriers that lead to academic and economic success for minority youth.

The events have featured Cabinet officers from the Obama Administration (Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack), leaders from the White House Domestic Policy Council, leaders from the Congress (including key staff and Members from both the House and Senate), Governors, Chief State School Officers, various State Cabinet-level individuals, and leaders from major state legislatures.

The recommendations were developed at a time of far more demanding high school graduation and college attainment requirements, and the worst unemployment among youth in American history. In addition, by far, the greatest impact of the recession has been on economically disadvantaged youth, especially minority youth. The following recommendations are the “bottom line” proceeds of those events, with all of that expertise and experience.

We hope that these recommendations will serve to provide important guidance to federal policy makers on what can be done – *NOW* – strategies that have proven to dramatically improve academic and economic outcomes for high-risk youth in general and high-risk minority youth in particular.

KEY CONCLUSIONS

From the research and work that was done, there were several important fundamental conclusions that serve as the foundation for the recommendations:

1. ***We do know what works*** in boosting academic and economic outcomes for high-risk minority youth. Nine different national programs were identified as examples that meet the demanding test of “proven at scale, over time, with independent research.” We also highlighted other programs showing great promise that have not yet been tested at scale and over a lengthy period of time.
2. Given the proven success of many programs (specifically including Jobs for America's Graduates), **there is a great sense of urgency to provide officeholders with a set of cost-effective recommendations in which they can have the highest level of confidence for success**, of course assuming effective execution.
3. **Real and long-term success almost always calls for strong leadership**, *sustained* commitment to a proven course of action, and real and meaningful coordination among multiple agencies. Repeatedly at the ***Thought Leader Events*** came the phrase “*Break down the silos*” in government that so often become major barriers to success.

The Federal policy recommendations from the *National Thought Leader Events* are broken down into three categories:

1. **Administrative** – Actions that can be taken by Federal policy makers that have **proven** to lead to improvements in academic and economic achievement.
2. **Legislative** – Legislative actions that are proven to create the environment, the capacities, and the direction for sustained success and to create and foster specific processes, programs, and systems that lead to success.
3. **Programmatic** – This section refers to specific programmatic delivery systems that have consistently demonstrated large-scale impacts in academic and economic achievement for high-risk youth in general and minority youth in particular.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Administrative/Executive Actions at the Federal Level

- A. To achieve effective coordination among the multiple agencies responsible for employment and education, it is recommended that consideration be given to ways to “break down the silos” – one of the primary themes of the work of the *Thought Leader Events* at both the state and local levels. This can be done in a number of ways through more effective interagency and Congressional Committee coordination to more coherence in program management among agencies.

One new idea, in keeping with this important ability to coordinate and maximize the effectiveness of available resources, is to consider the creation of a special position in the White House: *Counselor to the President for Skills*. This individual would have responsibility for coordinating and managing the efforts by the Administration to boost academic and economic achievement among young people in general and high-risk youth specifically, including minority youth in particular across the full range of Federal government programs.

- B. **Redirect Existing Funds to Make Priority on Youth Employment.** In light of the multiple severe impacts of sustained historic high youth unemployment, especially among the most at-risk and disadvantaged, it is recommended that the Administration and the Congress redirect **existing** resources (including all relevant upcoming federal grant programs) to focus and target proven strategies for reducing teenage unemployment. Existing federally funded strategies rarely contain special initiatives focused on reduction of youth unemployment as a core priority. **Special priority should be placed on targeting resources for education and training of youth to meet the skill requirements of existing and anticipated near-term jobs, including any necessary credentials or other requirements.**
- C. **Set tough, demanding performance objectives for inclusion in all future Federal employment, training, and education grants.** Realizing how limited the Federal resources are likely to be, it is recommended that future RFPs for Federal grant programs include demanding criteria for evidence of programs that have been proven to work at scale and over time. This approach is intended to assure that the limited resources available at the Federal level are directed at the most effective and proven strategies. In short, the Federal government should “set the bar high” for greatest impact in the use of its limited grant funds from all agencies, especially as they relate to education and youth employment and training

II. **Legislative Actions at the Federal Level**

- A. There was strong support for the strategies embedded in the Youth and Employment Innovation Funds, in addition to the basic approach of “Race to the Top.” As noted above, those Innovation Funds should encourage demanding standards based on proven performance, rather than more testing of different strategies. At the time of the nation’s highest unemployment among teenage youth and the many challenges facing youth in education, the consistent recommendation is to invest the limited resources in what has been proven to work over many years in multiple environments, in order to have the greatest impact as soon as possible.

(As an example, Jobs for America's Graduates and the National Urban League proposed a large-scale “**National Youth Challenge Grant**” based on demanding criteria that would require matching commitments from state and local public or private sector resources, focused exclusively on boosting employment for high-risk youth. This could be done within the re-authorization of the Workforce Investment Act or under a separate strategy. The key would be to focus resources on proven strategies for boosting employment at a time of the highest unemployment among teenagers in American history – and to help lead and incent state and local governments and private sector organizations to co-invest against those demanding criteria.)

- B. **Re-Authorization of the Workforce Investment Act.** Within the re-authorization of the Workforce Investment Act, **it is recommended that at least an equal level of current funding priority for education, training, and placement of economically disadvantaged youth be**

continued for both in-school and out-of-school youth. WIA is the only federal program that sets aside specific resources for the training and placement of economically disadvantaged youth, and it should be sustained.

It is urged that within the re-authorization of WIA, the costly and time-consuming eligibility process be changed to utilize other federal program eligibility requirements. The limited WIA resources available could be entirely devoted to serving the population rather than to determining eligibility (in many cases for the third or fourth time).

- C. **Credentialing.** As part of the process within the re-authorization of WIA or another federal legislation, resources to help assure credentialing of young people specific to the needs of existing and near-term jobs should be encouraged, and resources provided to help close the existing “skills gap” with regard to existing jobs.

III. Programmatic Actions at the Federal Level

Though the Federal government does directly fund programs, at least in limited numbers (Job Corps, YouthBuild as examples), the recommendation is to consolidate all other available Federal funding in competitions around programs and strategies proven to work **and** which can enlist and attract the commitments of state and local government and private sector funders for more consistent and focused efforts, with limited resources directly aimed at boosting academic and economic achievement against measurable objectives for which organizations can be held accountable.

As examples of the kinds of programs available to compete, nine programs that have been identified by the *Thought Leader* process that have been “proven to work, at scale and over time” are as follows:

- **College Summit**
- **Project GRAD**
- **Talent Development High School Model**
- **Talent Search**
- **Career Academies**
- **Job Corps**
- **National Urban League/Urban Youth Empowerment Program**
- **YouthBuild**
- **Jobs for America's Graduates**

SUMMARY

The Federal government has a **vitally** important role to play in providing leadership and incentives, and in establishing demanding benchmarks – the “bar” – for boosting academic and economic achievement for high-risk youth in general and minority youth in particular.

The basic strategy embedded in “Race to the Top,” the Education and Youth/Employment Innovation Funds, which encourages additional priority being set on boosting investments in proven strategies for increasing employment for youth is headed in the right direction.

A series of urgent new administrative and legislative actions can be taken at the Federal level with multiple options. In addition, there are important opportunities at hand to re-formulate major programs such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Perkins Act, and the Workforce Investment Act around more demanding criteria to assure investments are made in strategies and programs that are proven to work, at scale and over time. As additional resources become available, they should be made available in ways that **incent and attract state and local public and private sector resources around those strategies proven to work against demanding criteria**. Resources will clearly be very limited at the same time that unemployment among teenagers is the highest in American history. Therefore, **all available resources should be carefully and efficiently coordinated, and investments should be made in the strategies proven to work against a demanding set of criteria**.

Jobs for America's Graduates and the Co-Hosts of the *National Thought Leader Events*, along with hundreds of individual leaders and experts who came together for the events, stand ready to assist the Federal government in the design, development, and implementation of new legislative and programmatic strategies.