

## Reconnecting Louisville's High School Age Learners to a Path to Graduation

There are thousands of young people like Michael and Brooklyn living in Louisville today. Data from the 2020 Census, the most recent available, estimate that **one in seven (more than 7,000) 18- to 24-year-olds in Louisville lack a high school diploma.**<sup>i</sup> Each of these young people, like Michael and Brooklyn, had career and life goals that have become delayed or diverted altogether. The disruption in their education will overshadow their opportunities to reach their goals and to thrive in our community.

The interrelated and still unfolding public health, economic, and racial injustice crises impacting the last three school years have increased the number of young people experiencing educational disruptions and falling behind in credits needed to graduation. Early analyses indicate these disruptions are disproportionately impacting students of color and young people who grew up in poverty, adding to the urgency to create equitable access to academic opportunities and supports.

### Recommendations

Assisting the thousands of high school age youth and young adults to reconnect with school and reach their education goals will be complex and will require coordinated effort within schools and across the community. Whether the issues any one young person faces are the result of a personal or community crisis or a reflection of deep and long-term systemic problems may not be easy to discern. Nonetheless, young people who have experienced disruptions in their education are at risk of long-term disconnection and need pathways to opportunities today.

These recommendations outline community and school-based actions that can be implemented immediately. They are designed to re-focus attention on the **learning needs of students experiencing educational disruptions** and to limit further interruptions.

1. **Center young people in identifying the solutions.** The Coalition Supporting Young Adults and Kentucky Youth Advocates have convened a youth-led research team to identify solutions to the current challenges described by high school age learners. Based on focus groups and survey data, they have identified several strategies for mitigating dropout rates and reengaging young people in school. **These strategies will be detailed in a "Solutions Brief" to be released collectively by the coalition of partners in July 2022.**
2. **Create a network of education reengagement sites** in disenfranchised neighborhoods. To reconnect high school age learners with the academic opportunities and support they need, schools and community organizations can work together to develop and staff well-resourced, accessible sites offering information on education options, peer support, employment

opportunities, leadership training, and mental health resources. This work has started with the Coalition Supporting Young Adults through their efforts to create a network of support for Louisville's 16- to 24-year-olds.

3. **Train a community of education advocates.** Equip educators, families, coaches, court and child welfare officials, and young people with tools to advocate with high school age learners as they set academic goals, navigate education systems, and access services in and out of school.
4. **Create and expand pathways to high school graduation** that meet a range of educational goals and academic needs. Learners who are behind in credits can be better served, for instance, in smaller classes with in-person instruction, special educational services, and flexible schedules. Options for dual-enrollment, career and technical education, and work-based learning should also be expanded for high school students.
5. **Identify the policies and procedures that disrupt school enrollment and attendance in all child-serving systems.** Prioritize student learning in all schools in a district, in court decisions involving young people, and in child welfare investigations and services. Identify and change the processes that disrupt learning including exclusionary discipline practices and delays re-enrolling into school. Focus resources on helping learners make up the missed content when they return.

To recover from the economic, health, and social justice crises of the last two years, our community's youth and young adults must have equitable access to opportunities. With collective action, we can create the academic and life supports young people need to graduate from high school prepared to reach their goals.

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<sup>i</sup> U.S. Census American Community Survey, Table S1501, 5-Year Estimates, 2020.