



Data Brief & Recommendations

Re-Connecting Louisville's High School Age Learners with a Path to Graduation

June 2022

This brief summarizes data on the number of youth and young adults in Louisville who are off track to earning a high school diploma and offers system-level solutions for reengaging high school age learners with the comprehensive support they need to graduate.

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In collaboration with the Coalition Supporting Young Adults Education Workgroup

Key Points

- One in seven (more than 7,600) 18- to 24-year-olds in Louisville lacked a high school diploma prior to the pandemic. This number is expected to rise.
- Young people from low-income families are at significantly higher risk of not completing high school.
- Re-engaging young people with high school requires community-wide collective action. Listening to the solutions identified by young people is the first step.
- Additional academic options and supports are needed for high school age learners in Louisville.

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[Online Data](#)

Introduction

Michael, 18, has been taking care of his little brothers and helping his mother with family expenses since he was 15. When his work hours increased, he stopped going to school regularly. Now he wants to graduate but doesn't know how to catch up. He asks his mom for help, but she dropped out her senior year of high school. He thinks he would like to be an electrician but doesn't know how or who to turn to for help.



Brooklyn, 16, has been experiencing social bullying since starting high school two years ago. Due to the constant teasing and harassment, Brooklyn feels anxiety about going to school, has not been eating, and is not sleeping well at night. After missing more days this semester than she attended, her grades are dropping in the classes she needs to graduate. Brooklyn wants to someday become a nurse like her mom, but doesn't know how she will finish high school.

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 7,600) 18- to 24-year-olds in Louisville lack a high school diploma.⁽¹⁾ 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 graduate. 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. ⁽²⁾

One in seven (more than 7,600) 18- to 24-year-olds in Louisville lacked a high school diploma in 2020, prior to the pandemic. This number is expected to rise.

Causes of Educational Disruption and Disengagement

“Students who leave school before graduating are often struggling with overwhelming life circumstances that push school attendance far down their priority lists. The reasons they cite for dropping out are the breaking point—the end of the story, rather than the whole story.” (3)
Don’t Call Them Dropouts, America’s Promise

When and how a learner veers off course is different for each young person. The “whole story” often involves a mix of individual and community-level challenges experienced by learners that disrupt attendance in school or make it difficult to focus on learning. The challenges may be chronic and ongoing or may result from sudden or traumatic events. Individual level factors may be addressed by providing sustained or intensive support to students and their families. Community level factors, however, require longer term, systemic solutions.

System Level Factors

- **Academic:** curricula lacks cultural relevance to students or fails to challenge them.
- **Safety:** schools fail to protect students from unhealthy peer relationships, harassment, or violence.
- **Economic inequalities:** concentration of wealth and privilege restrict access to high-cost academic supports (tutors, summer learning experiences, test prep services), increasing achievement gaps and limiting pathways to higher level academic opportunities.
- **Policies:** codified rules that discriminate against students or student populations on discipline, course or school assignment, and access to services.
- **Institutional procedures:** child-serving systems including child welfare and juvenile justice systems fail to prioritize education.
- **Financial commitments:** lack of local funding for programs serving high school-age learners and lack of comprehensive strategy for leveraging funds to support these learners experiencing education disruptions.
- **Staff training and accountability:** lack of action against biased educators who signal directly or indirectly who is capable or worthy.

Individual Level Factors

- **Physical health:** an illness or injury, a pregnancy or other short-term medical condition.
- **Mental health:** an emotional or behavioral response to a crisis or trauma, mental illness.
- **Economic stresses:** lack of resources to attend school, housing instability, need to contribute to family income or financially independent.
- **Social marginalization:** being bullied or isolated from social opportunities, lacking a sense of belonging at school.
- **Academic:** missing basic skills, unmet special education needs, lacking study skills.
- **Family:** low expectations, disengaged or absent adults.

The Impact of Crises

In Louisville and throughout the U.S., the impact of these factors have been intensified by the compounding public health, economic, and social justice crises that impacted the last three school years and exposed the weaknesses in our systems to address the issues that contribute to education disengagement

We know from early studies that for many students, the educational gaps that existed before the pandemic—in access, opportunities, achievement, and outcomes—are widening. And we can see already that many of these impacts are falling disproportionately on students who went into the pandemic with the greatest educational needs and fewest opportunities—many of them from historically marginalized and underserved groups.

US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America's Students .

The public health and economic crises, calls for racial justice, and increases in gun violence are straining students, families, schools, and the community. The impacts of these traumas are evident:

- **Mental Health:** Forced isolation, loss of family members and peer connections, and limited access to school counselors caused many youth to struggle with their mental health without support. According to the new data from the Centers for Disease Control, more than a third (37%) of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 44% reported they persistently felt sad or hopeless during the past year. (4)
- **Economic stresses** from the loss of housing or family income forced many young people into the labor market or into roles caring for family members. One in five young people in Louisville experience poverty growing up and many report their income provides essential or the only support to the household. (5)
- **Lack of academic support.** Unlike elementary and middle school learners, programs to support high school age students were limited in Louisville when schools were closed and continue to be a low priority for decision makers.

Education Disruptions: How Many Learners are Impacted

Four interrelated indicators illustrate the scale of educational disruptions currently occurring for high school age learners in our community and the number of young adults who continue to have unmet educational goals:

3,803	1,132	7,623	19,700
Behind in credits last school year	Left before graduating with the Class of 2021	18- to 24-year-olds without High School Diploma	16- to 24-year-olds out of school and work
JCPS 2021	JCPS 2021	Louisville, 2020	Louisville MSA, 2020

The sources of these data are outlined in the Sources Section of this brief. [Detailed data sets are available online.](#)

Behind in Credits

This indicator describes the number of learners who have fallen behind their peers in credits earned toward graduation. From 2021 data provided by JCPS:

- 13.7% of all high school students were behind in credits. 37% of students in alternative schools (A5) were behind in credits.
- 80% of the students behind in credits qualified for Free and Reduced Lunch, 22% had exceptional educational needs, and 11% were English learners.
- 47% were African American and nearly 15% were Hispanic/Latino.

The Trends: The percent of students behind their peers in the number of credits earned toward graduation spiked during school years impacted by the pandemic. However, the number of students who are behind in credits has averaged more than 2,200 over the non-pandemic years reviewed.



Graduation

To understand the scale of education disruptions, we reviewed data on the number of students who were graduating within four years as well as the number of students who didn't graduate and were no longer in school. According to JCPS data from 2021:

- The 2021 graduation rate for the district is 84.4%.
- The graduation rates for students attending comprehensive schools is 87.5%. For students attending alternative schools, the graduation rate is 28.4%.



- The graduation rate for students experiencing the following:
 - Eligible for free or reduced meals: 81.9%
 - Homeless: 74.2%
 - Receiving special needs services: 63.3%
 - English learners: 60.8%
- 703 of the 1,132 (62%) of the students who didn't graduate in 2021 were economically disadvantaged, indicating poverty is a significant barrier to education.
- In 2021, 460 high school level students formally dropped out of school. 75% had not yet reached their senior year.
- 1,252 high school level students have withdrawn to "homeschool" since 2016-17, the first school year the compulsory age of enrollment increased to 18. Exiting to homeschool, a status with limited accountability, is widely considered a proxy for dropping out.

The Trends: The graduation rate has slowly increased for all students over the last five years. However, the graduation rate for some student population (students of color, English learners, and students with special education needs) remains significantly lower.

Education Attainment



The U.S. Census estimates the education level of young adults in Jefferson County and the Louisville metropolitan area in four categories: less than high school, high school graduate, some college and college graduate. For 2020 (five-year average):

- 7,625 (11.59%) of 18- to 24-year-olds in Jefferson County, KY and more than 14,000 (12.63%) of 18- to 24-year-olds in Louisville’s total metropolitan area had not yet earned a high school diploma.
- Approximately 800 adults earn a GED annually in Jefferson and surrounding Kentucky counties, indicating more pathways to a high school credential are needed.

The Trends: The percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds who have not yet earned a high school credential had fallen from nearly 15% of the population to less than 12% in the five years prior to the pandemic. Estimates from national researchers indicate these numbers, as well as the number of college non-completers, will rise.

Disconnection from School and Work

The number of young people (16 to 24 years) in a community who are “disconnected”, neither in school nor work, has become a key indicator of the capacity of a community to prepare youth to be self-reliant adults. This capacity includes the ability for a community to assist those with chronic or complex learning, economic, and social challenges. Young people who experience long periods of disconnection are more likely to report poor physical and mental health, lower incomes, and problems maintaining employment, at significant costs to the community .



In a June 2020 report from Measure of America, a national organization focusing on disconnected youth issues, the failure of Census data to fully document the impact of the current national crises on the number of disconnected youth and young adults is detailed. Despite the lag in data, the impact of the last two years is clear. For the Louisville MSA, Measure of American uses Census data to estimate:

- 19,700 youth and young adults (16 to 24 years) are neither in school nor work, representing 13.4% of all young people.
- Louisville is 72 out of the 100 largest cities in the U.S. in the rate of youth disconnection, below most of our peer cities.
- The disconnection rate is higher for young people who are male (14.7%) and those who are Latin/x (18.7%).

The Trends: The number and percentage of young people in school and work increases and decreases with shifts in the economy. However, Louisville consistently falls behind most of the peer cities it is compared to by the Greater Louisville Project.

“The Covid-19 pandemic will cause youth disconnection rates to spike dramatically. With students physically disconnected from schools and unemployment the highest it’s been since the Great Depression, young people with the fewest resources will be left even further behind their peers and face the highest barriers to reconnection. While it is clear that young people of all stripes will suffer, low-income people of color will be the hardest hit.” (6)

Measure of America, 2020

Online Data

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, focusing on 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.

Pathways and supports are needed 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.

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.



Data Sources

Data for this brief were provided by the following sources. Differences in the timeframes, definitions of geography and age are important to note. [Review the detailed data sets available online](#) to further understand these differences and analyze trends that may pinpoint potential actions.

Indicator	Definition	Source and Timeframe
Behind in Credits	Number of students behind in credits by grade level and school. Data on race, gender, and other demographics are available by school.	JCPS, 2016-17 through 2020-21
Graduation Rate	Percentage of students graduating from A1 and A5 high schools in JCPS. Data on race, gender, and other demographics are available by school. Total number of students graduating from JCPS are included.	JCPS, 2016-17 through 2020-21
Education Attainment	Number and percentage of young adults (18 to 24 years) who have completed four distinct levels of education at the time of the survey (less than high school, high school, some college, college degree), for Jefferson County, Kentucky.	U.S. Census American Community Survey S1501 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT 5-Year Estimates
Youth Disconnection	Number and percentage of youth and young adults (16 to 24 years old) who are neither in school nor working. Data are available for Jefferson County, Kentucky and the Louisville MSA	Measure of America using U.S. Census American Community Survey, 2016 to 2020 See notes

End Notes

[Online Data](#)

- (1) U.S. Census American Community Survey, Table S1501, 5-Year Estimates, 2020.
- (2) Measure of America, A Disrupted Year, 2022.
- (3) America’s Promise Alliance Center for Promise. Don’t Call Them Dropouts, 2014
- (4) New CDC data illuminate youth mental health threats during the COVID-19 pandemic. Retrieved 7/3/22 <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/p0331-youth-mental-health-covid-19.html>
- (5) Great Louisville Project: Children Ages 5 to 17 in Poverty. Retrieved 7/3/22, <https://greaterlouisvilleproject.org/factors/child-poverty-5-17/>
- (6) Measure of America, A Disrupted Year, 2022.

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US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America's Students

About Us

The Book Works is a nonprofit organization founded in 2009 as Emerging Workforce Initiative. Our organizational mission is to promote equitable access to education and employment for youth and young adults through network building, programs, and research. The young people we advocate with are whole and indispensable, despite the economic and social barriers they manage. We honor their goals and build on their strengths to help them reach those goals.



Coalition Supporting Young Adults is a collective action initiative of more than 60 community organizations and individuals who are committed to transforming the way Louisville provides care for and supports vulnerable youth and young adults. CSYA is a nonprofit organization founded with the support of local funding and foundation grants.

