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## Positive Development Strategies for Disconnected Latino Youth

*A Report of the NCLR Escalera Program*





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By Ana Hageage



**PEPSICO**



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The National Council of La Raza (NCLR)—the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States—works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans. Through its network of nearly 300 affiliated community-based organizations, NCLR reaches millions of Hispanics each year in 41 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. To achieve its mission, NCLR conducts applied research, policy analysis, and advocacy, providing a Latino perspective in five key areas—assets/investments, civil rights/immigration, education, employment and economic status, and health. In addition, it provides capacity-building assistance to its Affiliates who work at the state and local level to advance opportunities for individuals and families.

Founded in 1968, NCLR is a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan, tax-exempt organization headquartered in Washington, DC. NCLR serves all Hispanic subgroups in all regions of the country and has regional offices in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, and San Antonio.

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## INTRODUCTION

Educational attainment is one of the strongest predictors of future earnings. On average, students who complete high school earn \$630,000 more over their lifetimes than those who do not graduate.<sup>1</sup> However, for 42% of the country's Latino\* youth, this traditional pathway to economic mobility is fraught with challenges. Youth in general, and Hispanic youth in particular, face numerous barriers to academic and career success and are dropping out of high school at persistently high rates, joining the ranks of nearly five million† youth throughout the country who are disconnected from school and work and who have few prospects for economic mobility.<sup>2</sup>

In 2008, 3% of Hispanic males ages 16–25 were incarcerated, compared to only 1% of Whites, and on any given day in the United States, close to 18,000 Latino youth are incarcerated, mostly for nonviolent offenses.<sup>3</sup> Twenty-three percent of young Latinos lived below the poverty level in 2008, compared to 13% of White youth, and 26% of Hispanic females will become mothers by age 19, compared to 11% of White females.<sup>4</sup> Many Latino youth contending with the deportation of a parent or close relative leave school to take care of siblings or work to support themselves and their families.<sup>5</sup> Young people facing this range of barriers find themselves without necessary training and education and become further removed from financial and economic stability with each passing year.

- **28%** of Latino students ages 16–24 permanently drop out of public high school.
- Unemployment rates for Hispanics ages 16–24 soared to **34%** in 2008.
- By 2018, only **28%** of jobs will be available to people with just a high school diploma.

While definitions vary, NCLR defines disconnected youth as those between ages 16 and 24 who are out of school with or without a high school diploma or in danger of dropping out, and are detached from the labor market and/or postsecondary institutions. These youth lack the basic skills necessary to compete in the workforce, and they often require individualized attention and additional support beyond what is provided in traditional high school settings. Latino youth are all the more at risk of becoming disengaged from education and employment, due in large part to obstacles that can include learning disabilities, tenuous immigration status, language barriers, low income, pregnancy and parenting, lack of housing, involvement in the foster care system, and an overwhelming representation in the juvenile justice system.

Current trends show that Hispanic youth have also struggled with persistently low educational attainment. Only 58% of Latino youth graduate with a high school diploma, compared to a graduation rate of 78% for White students, and an estimated 28% of Latino students ages 16–24 permanently drop out of public high schools.<sup>6</sup> As of 2007, 40% of Latinos age 25 and older were not high school graduates, and Latino youth were more likely than any other group to be out of school without a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) or high school diploma between the ages of 16 and 24.<sup>7</sup> The economic costs associated with this level of detachment are dire—from tax revenue lost to unemployment, increased dependence on public support systems, and criminal involvement—and result in approximately \$240,000 in costs over an individual's lifetime.<sup>8</sup>

\* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

† The Government Accountability Office estimates that there are between 2.3 and 5.2 million disconnected youth in the United States. The figures vary depending on individual researchers' definitions of disconnected youth.

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Many of the students who do graduate from high school are ill-equipped for the transition to postsecondary education and the workplace; one-third of all students graduating from high school are underprepared for college and the workforce.<sup>9</sup> Hispanics who enroll in postsecondary education often receive less financial aid, resulting in additional barriers to a successful education and transition to adulthood.<sup>10</sup>

Latinos are also one of the fastest-growing segments of the U.S. population, poised to make up one-third of the American workforce by 2050.<sup>11</sup> As baby boomers begin to retire—leaving an estimated 32.4 million openings in the workforce over the next decade—there will be an increasing need for well-trained workers to fill vacancies.<sup>12</sup> Today's Hispanic youth stand to play a pivotal role in this transition, yet unemployment rates for Hispanics ages 16–24 soared to 34% in 2008, and overall youth unemployment is at its highest since World War II.<sup>13</sup>

**Unable to compete in growing sectors and technical fields without a high school diploma or postsecondary degree, these youth find themselves at a major economic disadvantage.**

Trends show that participation in the workforce is often difficult for disconnected Hispanic youth. Currently, 40% of Latinos age 25 and older who lack a high school diploma or equivalency are either unemployed or temporarily employed.<sup>14</sup> Unable to compete in growing sectors and technical fields without a high school diploma or postsecondary degree, these youth find themselves at a major economic disadvantage. The U.S. is slated to create 15.6 million new jobs by 2016 with close to 50% requiring a postsecondary degree; by 2018, only 28% of jobs will be available to those with just a high school diploma.<sup>15</sup> Most of these higher-skilled jobs will be in the education, health care, social services, computer science, and environmental



science sectors.<sup>16</sup> While Latinos are contributing to economic recovery in several growth industries,<sup>17</sup> they remain concentrated in low-wage occupations, including farming, fishing and forestry, food preparation and service, and grounds cleaning and maintenance.<sup>18</sup>

While there have been a number of federal, state, and local initiatives made in response to persistently high dropout rates, the issue remains a major concern for our country's workforce and growing Hispanic population. Programs that engage and advance disconnected Latino youth are a necessity if we hope to meet the needs of tomorrow's economy.



## POLICY BACKGROUND

As disconnected youth have drawn increased attention over the past several decades, policy and programmatic responses have evolved. Beginning with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, a core component of Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty,” federal policy aimed to bolster the nation’s overall economic viability by developing social programs and focusing services on high-needs youth. The Reagan administration pursued a combination of deregulation, reduced federal spending, and a shift away from federal responsibility for oversight and guidance of education.<sup>19</sup>

The Clinton era of devolution redefined the federal role in education by providing resources and guidance as well as metrics and accountability to help shape state and local programming to prioritize the needs of vulnerable youth. Building on lessons from pilot programs that served high-poverty neighborhoods, the government passed important pieces of legislation that included the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, the reauthorization of ESEA, which provided Title I funds to schools and districts with the poorest student populations, and the School to Work Opportunities Act. These laws expanded youth services, seeding programs that trained youth for work, encouraged community involvement, and boosted academic achievement.

Federal legislation during the 1990s also focused on youth workforce preparation. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 created a permanent funding stream for work experience, education and job training, and youth and leadership development for young people, including out-of-school youth. As part of the systemic restructuring under WIA, the Youth Opportunity (YO) Grants Initiative was introduced to target disconnected and high-needs youth. YO was instrumental in changing how communities work to reach and engage youth through open enrollment, a broad array of services, and cross-collaboration. The initiative also underscored the need for replicable programs supported by quantifiable data and served to elevate the youth-service approach and youth policy agenda.<sup>20</sup>

Recent efforts have renewed focus on the needs of disconnected youth. New research documents the continuing problems faced by high-needs youth, and states and philanthropies—bolstered in part by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)—have devoted efforts and funding to address the challenges and sparked state and local policy experimentation. Under ARRA, the expansion of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Emergency Funds allowed for subsidized summer youth employment for more than 120,000 youth nationwide through 2010. These programs are credited with fostering relationships between public agencies and private employers and for providing workers with opportunities to develop additional skills.<sup>21</sup> States also received funding for summer youth employment programs under ARRA through WIA funds that provided employment opportunities to an additional 314,000 youth in 2009.<sup>22</sup>

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Experimentation has also occurred in the education arena; states such as Indiana and Georgia provide further funding for youth participating in alternative education programs.<sup>23</sup> Vermont has implemented a competency-based approach to allow dropouts to obtain a high school diploma by achieving specific learning objectives in collaboration with adult education programs, schools, or community-based organizations.<sup>24</sup> Other states such as New York and Oregon have implemented preventative strategies through initiatives such as online classes, credit recovery, and dual-enrollment opportunities. And to curb college dropout rates, states such as Indiana, Ohio, and Tennessee have changed their higher education funding to award colleges based on degree attainment rather than enrollment.<sup>25</sup>

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These policy and programmatic innovations have showed that no single system can adequately address the dropout problem; Latino youth need a wide range of interventions delivered by a variety of youth-serving institutions and systems. Experimentation has played a large role in advancing our knowledge and understanding of how to engage and serve disconnected youth on a local level.

This report profiles one such experiment—a Latino-serving, community-based youth workforce development program, the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) Escalera Program: Taking Steps to Success, which was developed in 2001 in partnership with the PepsiCo Foundation and PepsiCo, Inc. and expanded in 2008 with the support of Shell Oil Company. Documenting the successes and challenges of three sites that have customized the program to meet their local needs, the report offers insight into how the Escalera Program improves academic and employment outcomes for disconnected youth, and it makes recommendations for policy and programmatic improvements.

### PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

NCLR embarked on this analysis to begin establishing a set of best practices for community-based organizations (CBOs), educators, policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders working to improve income and career mobility for disconnected Latino youth. This report is intended to contribute to the national discussion about the high unemployment and dropout rates of Latino youth and to underscore the value of effective, culturally relevant programs that reengage high-needs populations.

Within the report is an analysis of the Escalera Program's disconnected youth pilot model, its core components, and its successes and challenges in reaching and serving unemployed and out-of-school youth. NCLR profiles programs being operated by its Affiliates—American YouthWorks in Austin, Texas; HELP – New Mexico, Inc. in Las Vegas and Española, New Mexico; and AltaMed Health Services Corporation in Los Angeles, California.

Six staff and seven participants across the three sites were interviewed, as well as outside experts in youth policy and programming. Two focus group sessions were conducted with direct service staff across the three sites, and one focus group was conducted with youth participants. Participant outcomes and quarterly reporting data from the program sites also influence this report.





## CASE STUDIES

The Escalera Program: Taking Steps to Success provides positive youth development services through an after-school model for Latino youth ages 15–24. The program promotes economic mobility through educational attainment, career planning, and access to information about advanced careers, with the ultimate goal of closing the economic gap for Latinos by increasing the number of highly skilled and educated Latino youth and the ability of Hispanic CBOs to cultivate the talent pipeline.

The Escalera Program currently operates at six Affiliate sites; NCLR provides technical assistance, develops program tools and curricula, and uses the lessons learned to influence national policy initiatives. The program's disconnected youth model serves youth with a range of risk factors. For example, participants often score below grade level for reading and math, are low-income, first-generation college-bound, pregnant or parenting, adjudicated, or are in the foster care system.

The sites combine funding from a variety of sources, including formal and informal partners, to ensure that participants have access to the wide range of services that they need. Federal funding—such as that provided by Community Services Block Grants, WIA, and mentoring grants from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention—supports Escalera Program staff and activities, while funding from YouthBuild and AmeriCorps ensures that youth have access to stipends and educational awards. In addition to these sources, Escalera Program sites tap into a variety of state, local, and private funding tailored to their participants' needs. Affiliates also leverage direct services provided by partners like other community-based organizations, high schools, community colleges, and four-year universities. These partnerships contribute to the establishment of a recovery system for disconnected youth and range from formal, with established contracts, to informal arrangements.

### American YouthWorks: Austin, Texas

American YouthWorks (AYW) serves at-risk youth primarily from Dove Springs and Montopolis in south and east

Austin, neighborhoods that are 64–76% Hispanic and dotted with low-income households.<sup>26</sup> Many of AYW's participants have been or are currently involved in the juvenile justice system, or have parents who have been or are incarcerated. A large percentage of participants are also first-generation college-bound and often the first in their families to earn a high school diploma or GED.

AYW focuses on community service, education, hands-on job training, and preserving the natural environment. The organization currently operates a fully accredited charter high school, American YouthWorks Charter High School, and a GED program for youth ages 17–24. In conjunction with AYW educational programs, youth participate in the Service Learning Academy, which connects them to a variety of paid and unpaid internships and community service projects. Furthermore, AYW offers wraparound services that include counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and childcare and parenting skills courses through their Parent/Child Development Center.

### Participants often score below grade level for reading and math, are low-income, first-generation college-bound, pregnant or parenting, adjudicated, or are in the foster care system.

American YouthWorks began its Escalera Program work with disconnected youth in 2008, serving youth for 12 months to coincide with their school calendars and providing six months of follow-up services to graduates. The program is careful to offer flexibility to participants who require additional time to meet all of the competencies. Youth say that staff are “helpful...and [they] try to do whatever they can to get us prepared for the real world.” American YouthWorks receives federal funding through YouthBuild, AmeriCorps, and mentoring grants from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention that supports their Service Learning Academy and mentoring program and allows students to receive stipends and awards. State funds from the Texas Education Agency provide support for the public charter high school. The organization has also developed formal partnerships internally with other

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AYW programs and externally with the local community college to provide short-term crisis counseling and housing to Escalera Program participants and support and placement services for program alumni. Informal relationships have been established with local high schools, social service partners, and nearby universities for recruitment and referrals, and to facilitate enrollment in postsecondary programs for nontraditional youth.

To date, AYW has served 75 high-needs youth with a combined high school and GED graduation rate of 71%, based on data from the 2009 and 2010 cohorts. The program currently serves its third cohort of 26 youth.

### HELP – New Mexico, Inc.: Las Vegas and Española, New Mexico

HELP – New Mexico, Inc. (HELP) is headquartered in Albuquerque, New Mexico with more than 200 staff in 35 offices and/or Head Start and prekindergarten centers throughout the state. The New Mexico towns of Las Vegas and Española, where the Escalera Program is operated, have Hispanic populations totaling 83% and 84%, respectively, and youth in these rural towns experience heightened barriers to employment, education, and development.<sup>27</sup> With sparse services for youth, especially for disconnected youth, young people describe their difficulties completing school and their desire to excel and defeat stereotypes—to “prove everyone wrong...not end up pregnant, as people [would] assume.”

HELP provides a wide range of services such as adult education, job training and placement, early childhood education, youth development and care, self-help housing, construction, rural health clinics, land development, literacy training, affordable housing, and family counseling.

In partnership with NCLR and with support from the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions and the Commission for Community Volunteerism, HELP became the pilot site in 2008 for the Escalera Program’s disconnected youth model for rural participants. Youth in these sites engage in an 18-month service plan that starts in the spring and continues through their GED attainment; they are dually enrolled in the Escalera Program and High School Equivalency Program (HEP). Participating youth have expressed common feelings of isolation in their rural towns and credit the program with “expanding [their] minds,” and helping them “experience different places and things.”

HELP receives funding from the Department of Labor’s National Farmworker Jobs Program to support overhead expenses and from the state’s Community Services Block Grant to underwrite education and service activities. Additionally, the HELP Escalera Program was a recipient of AmeriCorps funds from the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions and the Commission for Community Volunteerism. HELP has contracts with local community colleges in Las Vegas and Española to provide GED classes, GED testing, and space for program-related events. The

### Youth Success Story

Francisquita Martinez is an Escalera Program participant at HELP and a single mother working hard to support her daughter. Through the Escalera Program, she participated in financial literacy workshops, developed her résumé, explored various career options, and improved her leadership and job readiness skills with her internship experience at a nearby Boys and Girls Club. She also began working toward her GED, and after only five weeks, her instructor believed that she was ready to take the exam. Francisquita earned her GED and was awarded a scholarship to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque; she credits the Escalera Program and the people she met with helping her succeed.





program maintains informal relationships with nearby social service agencies, high schools, juvenile probation officers, and local businesses for outreach purposes, to serve as an external referral network for wraparound services, and to provide placement for internships or work experience. Furthermore, a recent YouthBuild award will help form new relationships with nearby community organizations and the local housing authority.

HELP has served 32 youth overall, and data from the first cohort show a program graduation rate of 55%; this statistic reflects the initial difficulties of implementing a program for disconnected youth in rural settings across a wide geographic area and shows the effects of HELP's unforeseen staff turnover during the program's first year. HELP is currently serving a cohort of 12 youth, and data from this second cohort show that 75% of students have already completed their GED, are enrolled in college, or are on track to do so.

### **AltaMed Health Services Corporation: Los Angeles, California**

AltaMed Health Services Corporation (AltaMed) is a community-based comprehensive health care center that provides a variety of medical services and youth programs with the goal of eliminating disparities in health care and human services. They are located in East Los Angeles and serve disconnected youth from the Boyle Heights area, an immigrant neighborhood that has over time received influxes of Japanese, Jewish, and Russian immigrants; in its most recent incarnation, Hispanic immigrants make up fully 94% of its population.<sup>28</sup> AltaMed's disconnected youth participants face multiple risk factors including, but not limited to, involvement in the juvenile justice system, homelessness, pregnancy and parenting, and involvement in the foster care system.

In 2001, AltaMed became the first Escalera Program Affiliate and remains the program's largest site. AltaMed now operates the Early Escalera Program providing early intervention for sophomores, the traditional Escalera

Program serving juniors and seniors, and the disconnected youth model serving out-of-school or GED-seeking youth. Additionally, in 2010, AltaMed was awarded a grant to test and pilot an alumni program specifically serving Escalera Program graduates.

AltaMed uses funding from WIA and the state of California's Department of Social Services Cal-Learn Program to support participants who are under 19 and are pregnant or parenting. The organization receives additional funding from NCLR's Institute for Hispanic Health, which supports AltaMed's *promotora* parent outreach initiative. The site has developed formal partnerships with a variety of youth-serving organizations to secure help with recruitment, space, resources for transportation, GED classes and other certification programs, access to a comprehensive database, and referrals for supportive services, specifically long-term counseling and housing. Informal partnerships with local community colleges and universities provide the Escalera Program with volunteers, financial literacy services, and internship placement sites. Local businesses and city council offices also serve as informal partners for internships throughout the year.

In partnership with the East Los Angeles Occupational Center (ELAOC), AltaMed provides disconnected youth with GED classes, counseling, case management and referrals, and has served 94 youth since 2004 with a 66% graduation rate across a twelve-month program cycle. The program currently serves a cohort of 15 students.



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### FINDINGS

Across the three sites, Escalera Program services aim to provide disconnected youth with six core competencies: reconnection, foundational skills, leadership and personal development, educational attainment, workforce readiness, and career exploration. NCLR's research has shown these skill sets to be effective in helping disconnected youth develop healthy cognitive, social, and emotional skills, prepare for the rigorous academic challenges posed by postsecondary institutions, and become competitive candidates for employment.

#### Reconnection

The crucial first step for the majority of disconnected youth is reconnection.<sup>29</sup> Participants initially decide to reconnect due to events such as having a child, an inability to find work, or witnessing peers graduate and move on. Youth often describe their frustration with limited employment opportunities, or their desire to set an example for their children or siblings as motivations for their reengagement.

Among the activities that engage youth are workshops, group interaction, and case management services. Case management has stood out as particularly important across all three sites, and staff credit this effort with helping youth cope with their circumstances and elevating their self-esteem, especially for participants who exhibit learning difficulties or disabilities. Ultimately, case management helps youth reconnect to school and learning. The positive relationships that youth develop with case management staff are cited by participants as vital to remaining engaged. As one Escalera Program participant remarked about her case manager, "She really relates to us; I feel motivated and ready."

Furthermore, participants perceive the program's environment as a safe setting where they can receive individualized attention and where everyone is in the same boat. They are able to belong to a group where there is no stigma about being a "bad student." Just as crucial, many youth benefit from proximal inspiration—being

able to relate closely to staff from similar backgrounds who are positive adult role models; the participants begin to envision themselves succeeding along a similar path.<sup>30</sup> When asked about his relationship with Escalera Program staff, one participant stated, "Because she's gone through a lot of the same stuff...if you see her working for her master's degree, then you see yourself possibly being able to do it."

#### Youth often describe their frustration with limited employment opportunities, or their desire to set an example for their children or siblings as motivations for their reengagement.

Yet challenges for reengagement abound. Youth and staff commonly cite a lack of permanent housing and time conflicts between work and Escalera Program activities as major barriers to reconnection. One staff member stated, "Youth's home life is the most prevalent reason for them to become disconnected; they have no stable home, are often transient, living with friends, or are homeless." Participants often rely on their jobs to support themselves and their families and are therefore unable to attend all activities or GED and High School Equivalency Program classes. As one staff member said, "The priority for disconnected youth is employment...work is necessary to support their families, sometimes even their own children."

Sites have developed different strategies to address these challenges. AYW's Escalera Program forged a partnership with their Casa Verde Builders program to enable youth to participate in GED preparation for half of the day, green jobs training for the second half of the day, and Escalera Program activities after school; youth also receive stipends for their work.\* Programs at AltaMed and HELP foster partnerships with external youth-serving agencies to refer participants who need assistance with housing and employment. In addition, programs maintain flexibility in their schedules to accommodate youth.

\* The Casa Verde Builders program model is facilitated by the YouthBuild model, which AYW also implements. This model allows participants to have a flexible schedule and receive stipends.





## Foundational Skills

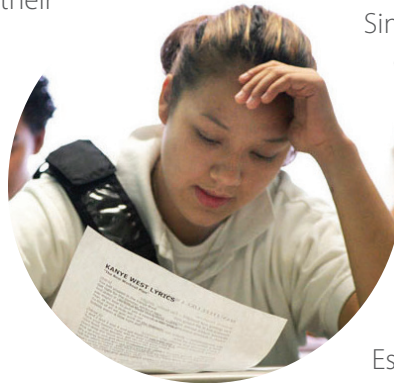
Disconnected Latino youth must learn effective communication, conflict resolution, problem-solving, and critical-thinking skills in order to succeed. Participants learn useful listening, writing, and speaking skills and practice with their peers. Each of the Escalera Program sites adds depth to these competencies by teaching research methods so that participants know where and how to search for employment, social services, and postsecondary options. To further develop their skills, students make presentations to their peers and other Affiliate partners, and they also attend NCLR events such as the Annual Conference and National Latino Advocacy Days, which offer opportunities for showcasing their new abilities.

Foundational skills are reinforced through positive relationships and communication with Escalera Program staff and with their peers, which helps students express these skills in outside relationships and in the workplace. One participant validated the benefit of his new abilities by stating that the Escalera Program taught him “how to present [himself] and treat others”—an invaluable workforce skill. Another participant stated that the program taught him, “If you need help—communicate it,” and he is now able to independently conduct Internet research for schools and jobs.

HELP’s Escalera Program participants get additional benefits from the rural location and small cohorts. Youth are able to make new friends through the program (a difficult task for out-of-school youth in a rural locale), participate in healthy activities, and even recommend more social activities to keep them connected: “It would be really cool to...have a sport and to socialize with a bunch of people...that would help me get engaged.” Furthermore, youth interviewed in New Mexico stated that the small group size of six to 12 encourages their participation in activities. When asked why they remained in the Escalera Program, youth stated that it was because the program is “smaller with fewer peers.”

## Leadership and Personal Development

Hispanic youth are empowered to advance their skills by setting their own personal, educational, and career goals and devising a plan of action to meet them at their own pace. Participants apply their understanding of team and leadership roles and responsibilities and learn to take advantage of resources available to them through activities such as community service, financial management, and individualized academic and career planning.



Since disconnected youth lack the opportunities of a traditional school setting, they are often left without occasions to develop the skills desired by employers. Participation in weekly volunteer activities teaches the importance of attendance, encourages deeper engagement in community service, and facilitates leadership. Many youth stated that they were initially attracted to the Escalera Program because they were interested in “getting involved with the community.” Staff also cited participants’ involvement in weekly activities as evidence of positive leadership and personal development. As one staff member observed of a program participant, “She has conducted the monthly social meeting on her own, complete with projects and speeches.” One participant also noted his personal growth by stating that he now enjoys the “positive lifestyle” that he has maintained in volunteering with those who are less fortunate.

Each site experiences its own unique challenges and successes in helping participants achieve leadership and personal development. Due to its rural location, HELP can offer only a limited number of community service activities, but nonetheless requires participants to complete three hours per month at minimum. AYW uses its relationship with the green jobs training program to give students the opportunity to participate in green community service activities.

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### Educational Attainment

Without educational achievement, youth are at risk of a lifetime of low wages and limited economic mobility. All Escalera Program sites work to ensure that participants earn a GED or High School Equivalency and enroll in some form of postsecondary education, either by offering classes within their organizations or by partnering with other organizations that provide this service. Affiliates also offer tutoring, college preparatory assistance, college visits, financial aid workshops, scholarship opportunities, and ACT/SAT preparation.

**“I really didn’t think college was an option for me. Now...I’m trying to enroll in Austin Community College in the fall.”**

One key benefit of the academic assistance is participants’ access to individualized attention, one-on-one or small group tutoring, and self-paced learning. Escalera Program participants state that the program “helps with school when [they] have trouble and encourages tutoring.” Furthermore, the programs offer their participants—the majority of whom are first-generation college-bound—support in understanding and navigating the college research, application, and scholarship processes. One participant stated, “I really didn’t think college was an option for me. Now...I’m trying to enroll in Austin Community College in the fall.” Through the Escalera Program, participants understand that educational attainment is the best path to economic security. “I don’t want to struggle,” stated one youth. “I want to have a life where I don’t have to work at a store and struggle the way my dad struggles.”

Although participants have made substantial gains toward their educational goals, staff at HELP have encountered difficulties in serving dropouts with low math and reading levels. Said one staff member, “Students who drop out of school do not receive adequate support while in school... [we have] a student who dropped out in seventh grade [who is] testing at a third-grade math level.” Since rural

New Mexico lacks resources and programs that serve this population, HELP has worked hard, but has struggled to fill this void.

### Workforce Readiness

Employers often cite workforce readiness skills—workplace etiquette, responsibility, self-esteem, time management, and social networking—as central to their hiring decisions. Escalera Program participants complete an internship or work experience prior to graduation from the program, and they participate in mock interviews, etiquette workshops, and networking events. All three sites cultivate these opportunities for disconnected youth through relationships with other organizations, community leaders, and local businesses. Escalera Program staff also assist youth with building résumés, completing applications, writing cover letters, and developing portfolios.

**“Even when I went to look for jobs I experienced that...they thought that I would work for them for two weeks and then quit.”**

The internships and community service opportunities afforded by the Escalera Program serve as youth’s introduction to the work world and as a venue for practical application of their acquired skills. Participants credit this opportunity as a contributing factor to obtaining their first jobs outside of the program; since jobs lead to further development of workplace skills, participants become increasingly competitive in the workforce and are able to work toward economic mobility. One participant stated that “to say that you had a job with a nonprofit organization and volunteer work to show that you care about the community—managers and employers care about that.”

Despite this success, participants still face frustrating gaps between employers’ expectations and their abilities or prejudices about hiring young people. As one student lamented, “Even when I went to look for jobs I experienced that...they thought that I would work for them for two weeks and then quit.” For the most high-needs



participants, development of conflict resolution, effective communication, and clear presentation skills takes time. Employers are also reluctant to hire youth who have been involved in the juvenile justice system, and most states allow them to deny jobs to anyone with a criminal record, regardless of whether a person has been convicted of a crime. One youth described his experiences with this situation: “I’ve learned the hard way from bad choices. Now that I need a job, it’s hard to find one.”

## Career Exploration

The Escalera Program offers Hispanic youth the support that they need to set and prioritize personal, educational, and career goals. Disconnected youth—and youth in general—require assistance to visualize what it takes to pursue careers beyond those of their family and friends. In tandem with their community service activities and internship experiences, participants complete career assessments to identify strengths, weaknesses, and fields of interest. Based on these results, youth learn to research and articulate the paths to various careers and identify the type of degree required, the length of time they should expect to be in school, specific job duties, and realistic starting salaries. They are also taught how to market their skills by participating in group activities and making presentations to their peers.

**“Escalera has helped support me because we get together and discuss my plan.”**

To achieve economic mobility, Hispanic youth must be excited and take ownership of their future beyond the Escalera Program. They must understand what career paths are available to them and develop the skills to independently research all options, including those fields in which Latinos are underrepresented, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The Escalera Program enables youth to make informed and intentional decisions about their paths throughout postsecondary

education and into the workforce, increasing their likelihood of success. A participant described the benefits of career exploration, saying that “Escalera has helped support me because we get together and discuss my plan.” Another youth further illustrates the effects of this competency by articulating his plans for the future: “After I’ve completed my core classes, I want to go to the Art Institute of California.”



Escalera Program staff have found this competency to be the most challenging to bring about as it requires strong, sustained collaboration with professional networks. Staff at AYW and AltaMed have been able to incorporate this competency into a regular speaker series where professionals from a variety of fields discuss their job duties and career paths. In rural New Mexico, HELP uses field trips to expose youth to different professional fields and environments.

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### LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure that the successes of effective programs serving disconnected youth can be replicated and brought to scale, NCLR offers the following lessons and recommendations from the field for policymakers, funders, and program administrators.

#### **Collaboration with other youth development stakeholders is essential for community-based organizations that serve disconnected and high-needs Hispanic youth.**

While such organizations are essential for engaging youth and are often the first point of contact and service, the responsibility for ensuring that youth access the educational, personal, and career development that they need cannot be borne by community-based organizations alone. To provide strong, holistic services, relationships both within and outside of the organization are crucial. Chief among these are partnerships with other youth-service providers, high schools, postsecondary partners, juvenile justice representatives, local businesses, and state and local stakeholders. Programs that have developed strong, collaborative partnerships are better able to help Hispanic youth navigate through their most persistent barriers.

- **Recommendation**

Encourage collaboration and partnership among local communities and youth-serving programs and institutions through funding that rewards the development of a dropout recovery system that provides seamless wraparound services for the most at-risk populations.

#### **Case management is an essential yet underfunded component of disconnected youth programs.**

Reconnecting youth and helping them navigate services and systems requires the guidance of qualified case managers. Across the board, youth participants cited their relationships with their case managers as integral to their participation in the program; it is imperative that development of effective and culturally competent case

managers is fully invested in. This component is often missing from schools or other youth-serving organizations due to a lack of cultural competence and funding.

- **Recommendation**

Funding for disconnected youth programs should take into account the costs that community-based organizations incur for maintaining appropriate staff-to-youth ratios and training and developing skilled case managers, and the associated costs of providing high-quality case management services.

**Disconnected Latino youth benefit from longer periods of service.** Analysis shows that youth seeking assistance through the Escalera Program contend with an array of issues such as learning disabilities, housing instability, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. Successful programs offer a longer range of services from outreach through graduation and beyond, allowing participants additional time to achieve program goals. However, doing so often conflicts with funders' demands to produce shorter-term outcomes and demonstrate progress.

- **Recommendation**

Invest in the development and implementation of programs that offer services to disconnected youth for longer program cycles, and establish qualitative measures of success in addition to quantitative outcomes.

**Participants fare better when family support is present.** While the definition of "family" varies for disconnected youth, those families who are engaged in the youth's program participation are better equipped to offer increased support. Early analysis shows that family support helps increase attendance in program activities and eases the transition into postsecondary institutions.

- **Recommendation**

Explore models that help families become partners, and include them in each step of participants' progress to illustrate the merits of involvement and of supporting participants' educational and professional endeavors.



## ENDNOTES

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