



# PREPARING OUR YOUTH FOR WORK: A COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT



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# Executive Summary

In February 2009, Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont (GISP) launched a year-round youth employment program called “Youth Job Connection” (YJC) that offered workforce development classes and job search assistance to at-risk youth ages 14–21 in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Well-versed in and known for workforce development services for at-risk adult populations, this program followed Goodwill’s first foray into such services for youth through its delivery of the Summer Youth Employment Pilot program in partnership with the City of Charlotte the previous year. Although this represented a logical extension of its services to a younger demographic, it also presented the challenge of tailoring these services to this new population. Not long after the program began, leaders at Goodwill decided to take a step back and get an outside perspective on this initiative. In September 2009, Goodwill commissioned the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute to assess the need for a workforce development program for youth in the community and recommend any changes that should be made to put its program on the right track.

“Goodwill plans to use the findings to guide and inform the design and delivery of our services to at-risk youth in our community to ensure that we are making the greatest long term impact possible while effectively leveraging available resources.”

-Michael Elder, GISP  
President & CEO

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Charged with conducting a needs assessment for youth employment services in Mecklenburg County, the Institute began its research by examining the two sides of the service delivery equation: the level of need for a particular service and the array of services that address that particular need. On the need side of the equation, the Institute turned to secondary data to paint a detailed portrait of the youth demographic in Mecklenburg County and, in particular, those within that population who are most in need of employment services: at-risk and disconnected youth. On the service supply side of the equation, the Institute compiled a comprehensive and in-depth catalog of all of the programs and organizations in Mecklenburg County that provide employment services to at-risk and disconnected youth. This catalog not only provides a valuable tool for the youth service community, but the information from interviews and analysis of the program information also helped identify gaps in the current service array Goodwill could fill as well as potential strategic partnerships Goodwill might want to pursue. Simultaneously, we reviewed examples of approaches that are considered to be “best practices” for such programs in cities throughout the nation.

Following this initial stage of the research, the Institute set out to talk to the many stakeholders in the development of at-risk and disconnected youth about the needs of this population and how best to meet those needs at the program, organization, and community levels. For those that had experience with the Youth Job Connection program, we also sought feedback on the elements and operation of that program in particular. Using the findings from the data and best practices to guide the formulation of questions, we administered on-line surveys to youth, employers, and school professionals; conducted focus groups with youth, parents, Goodwill staff, and youth service agencies; and conducted interviews with civic and business leaders, employers, school officials and individuals that provide services to youth throughout the community.



Through the surveys, focus groups, and interviews, we received feedback from over 350 individuals. Finally, we analyzed the data, best practices, and feedback from the surveys, interviews and focus groups to develop a detailed picture of the challenges facing Charlotte’s youth, the community’s response to these challenges, and recommendations for new and/or improved approaches to open meaningful opportunities to this city’s young citizens.

## DISCONNECTED YOUTH NATIONALLY AND LOCALLY

Despite the many laments of “young people today”, the great majority of youth in our nation will drop their “whatever” attitudes, retract their outstretched hands, and blossom into independent, working adults and contributing members of society. Unfortunately, not all youth achieve this. Some youth disengage from the social institutions of school and work, essentially disconnecting from their community and society, and many become adults who have difficulty finding stable jobs or never work at all and exist outside mainstream society, impoverished and isolated. This second group is referred to as “disconnected youth”.

Most similar studies define disconnected youth as young people in a variety of age ranges (anywhere from 12 to 25) who are not in school, are not working, and do not have a high school diploma. These studies also acknowledge that youth in certain circumstances (such as youth living in poverty, in single-parent

“The problem of disconnected and at-risk youth is a serious issue. We have a lot of youth trying to find their way and understand their purpose. It affects everyone, whether you are from a corporation trying to hire talented people or a family trying to raise children.”

- Reggie Isaac, Senior Director,  
Microsoft Charlotte Campus

families, youth in or aging out of foster care, adjudicated youth, pregnant or parenting teens, etc) are highly vulnerable to becoming disconnected. The Institute chose to focus on both youth who are disconnected as well as those at high risk of becoming disconnected in the future, and thus defined at-risk and disconnected youth as young people between the ages of 14 and 24 who fall under one or more of the following categories:

- Youth not in school, not employed, and lacking a high school diploma
- Youth in alternative schools
- Adjudicated youth
- Pregnant or parenting teens
- Youth in or aging out of foster care
- Homeless youth
- Youth struggling with substance abuse

Overarching all of these categories is poverty.



## Youth in Mecklenburg County

According to the most recent data, an estimated 116,000 people in Mecklenburg County fall between the ages of 15 and 24. One-fifth of these youth are in poverty, putting a significant number at-risk in at least one regard. Only 1/3 are currently employed, and the unemployment rate for this age group is around 18%, while that of the general population is hovering between 10 and 11%.

The following statistics provide an idea of the size of the highest risk categories in Mecklenburg County.

- Over 2,000 students dropped out of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) in 2008–09. These dropouts are predominantly male and black.
- During the same year, there were about 750 students attending alternative schools. These students are also predominantly black and male as well as low-income.
- About 3,200 youth in this age range (14-24) are or have been involved with the criminal justice system.
- Over 1,300 young women between the ages of 15 and 19 and 2,100 unmarried women between the ages of 20 and 24 gave birth in 2008.
- In the 2008-2009 fiscal year, 455 youth between the ages of 13 and 18 were in the foster care system in Mecklenburg County and 46 youth “aged out”.
- As of May 2010, over 3,000 youth in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools were homeless.

Geographically, the neighborhood with the highest number of disconnected youth is East Forest in east Charlotte, and that with the highest concentration of disconnected youth is J.T. Williams in north Charlotte. Other neighborhoods with notably high values and/or concentrations of disconnected youth include the Hidden Valley and Mineral Springs/Rumble Road neighborhoods in northeast Charlotte, the Henderson Circle, Nevin Community, and University Park neighborhoods in north Charlotte, the Todd Park, Ashley Park, and Boulevard Homes neighborhoods in west Charlotte, and the Montclair South, Starmount Forest, and Yorkmount neighborhoods in southwest Charlotte. The lowest concentrations of disconnected youth within the City of Charlotte appear in south Charlotte.

“The youth in this age group who are from families in poverty, and many are from families that have experienced intergenerational poverty, are much more likely to have a lack of hope for the present and the future and even a lack of knowing how to go about obtaining skills.”

- Barb Pellin, Assistant Superintendent, CMS

## KEY FINDINGS

### ***Need for youth employment services in Charlotte is considerable.***

The secondary data analysis revealed that there is a sizeable population of disconnected and at-risk youth in Mecklenburg County and that many of them are either unemployed or not even actively looking for work. This need for employment services was further confirmed by numerous groups we heard from in the primary research. The community leaders spoke to this in general terms; the local agencies and school professionals provided anecdotal evidence through their experience serving and interacting with this population; and the youth we surveyed said directly that the area in which they need the most help is finding a job. Among the many barriers that stand in the way of these youth

finding jobs, the most pressing according to youth, parents, and school professionals alike, are age and lack of experience, transportation, and lack of motivation.

### ***Charlotte's youth employment service system is in need of repair.***

In the search for best practices, we found that communities with successful initiatives for disconnected youth address the problem at the community level, requiring extensive collaboration between the public and private sectors and non-profit organizations. Such collaborative community efforts produce a coordinated service delivery system that minimizes unnecessary service duplication and gaps in service, facilitates tracking of participant success and evaluation of individual programs as well as the system as whole, and enables the implementation of the cornerstone of workforce development services—work experience—on a large scale. Through the primary research, we found that the system in Charlotte is far from this model. First, these programs, overall, do not serve truly disconnected youth, the individuals who are most in need of employment services. Two populations, although relatively few in numbers, are of particular concern: youth aging out of foster care and youth completing incarcerations. Second, there is very little collaboration among these service agencies in Charlotte. Third, the effort to track the fate of program participants is minimal to non-existent among these agencies, making evaluation of these programs' individual and collective success difficult if not impossible. Finally, these programs are, as a whole, failing to provide meaningful work experiences for their young participants.

### ***Goodwill's YJC program is a respectable start but needs improvement.***

One of the key findings that emerged from the youth survey and focus groups is that, like many of the other related programs in Charlotte, Goodwill is not serving truly disconnected youth through this program. However, it is serving youth put at-risk by poverty, a family headed by a single mother, and their status as a racial minority (primarily black). Disconnected, at-risk, or not, the vast majority of these individuals are in great need of employment services and are grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Goodwill program.

“There is a lot of fragmentation. These youth are being served by multiple program areas that are not connected. We need to coordinate our work so youth are served with comprehensive programs without duplication of service.”

- Barb Pellin, Assistant Superintendent, CMS

In talking to the youth participants, their parents, and the program staff, we found that the greatest strength of this program is its friendly, passionate, and dedicated staff. The feedback on the classes and curriculum was less enthusiastic, and the general opinion is that this area could use an overhaul that would result in shorter classes with fewer PowerPoints and more interactive activities. The weakest element of this program proved to be the work experience component. Few of the participants we talked to had obtained jobs through the program (and many who did

worked at a Goodwill store or in the corporate office). Further, despite extensive efforts, we had a difficult time getting feedback from employers who had hired YJC participants in the past or employers that might be interested in participating in the future, underscoring the weakness of this component in this program as well as the larger system.

Other particularly valuable feedback on the program included the following.

- The single, centralized Freedom Drive location of the program is inconvenient at best and a deal-breaker at worst for many participants and their parents.
- The program needs to be advertised more effectively.
- For most teenagers, the name “Goodwill” conjures images of poor people rummaging through second-hand clothes and causes them to think twice about participating in the program (if they even know it exists in the first place).



## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Using the systemic and programmatic findings of this study as a guide, we have developed a number of recommendations for Goodwill and the Charlotte community as a whole to improve the workforce development services available to at-risk and disconnected youth in the community. The following four key recommendations provide avenues for addressing this challenge.

### ***1. Goodwill can and should be one of the coordinators/leaders of a new, community-wide initiative for youth workforce development.***

Out of the best practices research, we developed a model to illustrate how a community should address the problem of disconnected youth. This model consists of six pillars that represent the service areas needed to support the development of at-risk and disconnected youth in a community:



passionate champions within local government; an effective workforce development board; a network of youth employment service providers with strong private and public partnerships; education partners with innovative approaches; engaging social services and law enforcement; personal development and faith-based initiatives for emotional maturity. Each pillar provides a unique, critical support, and

when one is missing or weak, it is difficult if not impossible for a community to decrease the numbers of disconnected youth in a significant way.

“Young people need life skills and professional skills that go beyond individual job skills. They need to learn accountability, planning, and having a good sense of what they want to accomplish in life.”

- Reggie Isaac, Senior Director, Microsoft Charlotte Campus

Through the primary research, we found such a collective, community-wide approach to the disconnected youth issue has not occurred in Charlotte; few of the necessary pillars are as strong as they need to be, and interaction between pillars- a critical element of the model- is severely limited.

While there is clear interest in promoting a community-wide response to the many issues confronting youth in Charlotte (for example Mayor Foxx’s recent efforts to focus on “The Future of Youth in Charlotte” and the creation of The Larry King Center of the Council for Children’s Rights), there is still a void in leadership specifically focused on the employment of at-risk

and disconnected youth. When this gap was noted by several community leaders involved in this study, they also pointed out that the interest among the key youth organizations in working together is at an all-time high. In order to start building a strong community workforce development initiative for youth in Charlotte, some person or organizations must take the lead and bring all of the stakeholders to the table. We believe one of those organizational leaders could and should be Goodwill. Finally, we recommend that Goodwill continue to implement best practices in its youth programs and play a coordinating role to promote the community-wide adoption of these workforce development initiatives for disconnected youth.

## ***2. Work experience is crucial and can happen through intensive/extensive public, private, non-profit collaboration.***

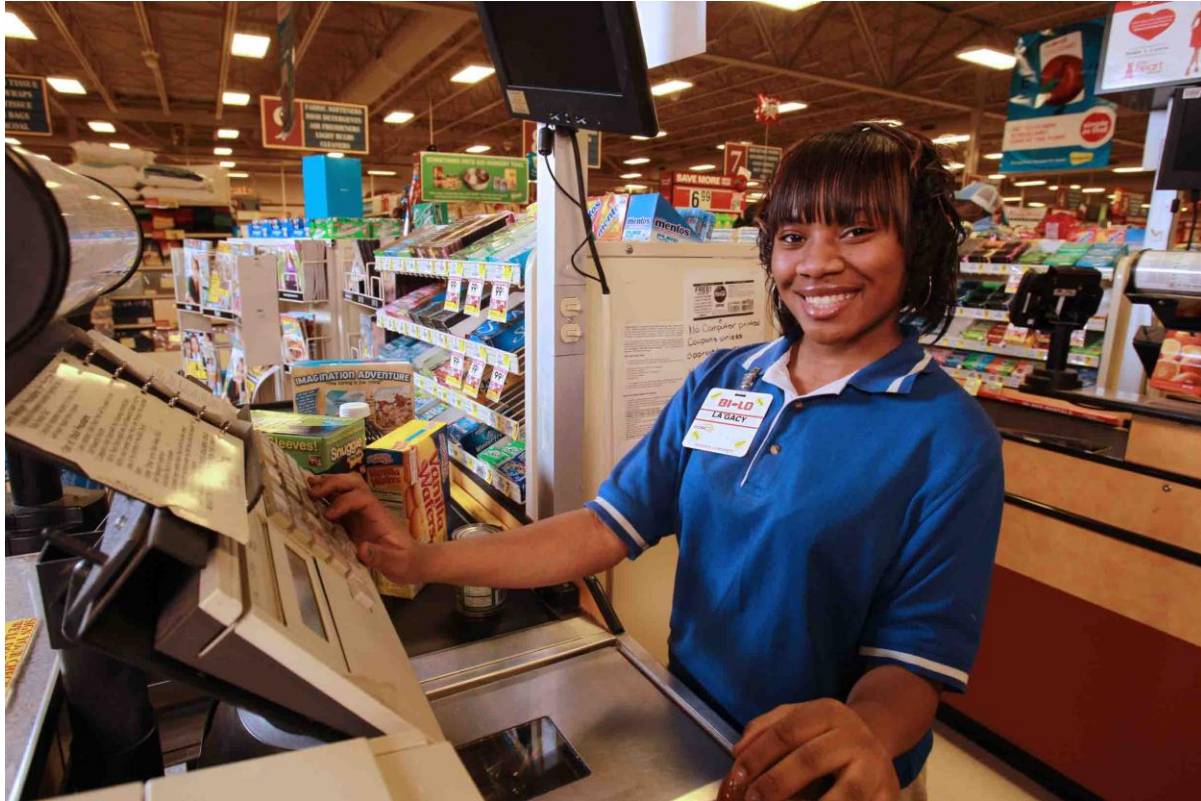
An integral part of the community’s youth workforce development initiatives must be providing at-risk and disconnected youth real work experience. In order to do this in a significant way, there must be a collective effort from both the public and private sectors and a true commitment among all stakeholders to this disconnected youth initiative. Resources will need to be allocated in order to provide financial incentives for employers, stipends for youth, and job developers and work support specialists to find and maintain job opportunities and provide close supervision for youth filling the positions. The concept of work experience will also need to be widened from traditional part- or full-time jobs to include the full range of valuable work and work-like experiences, which encompass such activities as mentoring, job shadowing, internships, and apprenticeships.

“We need to find better ways to use public and private resources to find work experience for youth.”

- Anthony Foxx, Mayor, City of Charlotte

Goodwill could model best practices for the development of an effective work experience component with the goal of recruiting other service providers and public

and private employers into a county-wide job development and placement center over time. Mentoring activities could build upon the GoodGuides initiative Goodwill began in 2010, which is aimed at helping youth build career plans and skills and prepare for school completion, post-secondary training and productive work by providing structured and supportive relationships with trusted, caring adult volunteer mentors.



### ***3. The success of program participants should be monitored and tracked.***

In talking to community leaders and service providers, we found that few of the existing youth workforce development programs track the fates of their participants (whether they find jobs, whether they end up in jail, etc), and the few that do only follow participants up to 6 months after leaving the program, which is not long enough to determine if any significant impact was made. Thus, we recommend that a comprehensive, uniform strategy to track participants through program completion and beyond be designed (using a best practices as a guide) and implemented for the collective youth workforce development system and the individual programs within it. Such a system would attempt to monitor a pre-determined set of outcomes (employment status, poverty status, legal status, etc) for program participants on a regular basis for a period of two to three years after completing the program.

Like the work experience piece, in order for a tracking system to be effective, it will require a collective effort among the many youth workforce development programs in the community. An

effective system will also require a significant financial investment in order to provide incentives needed to entice youth to continue providing the desired information year after year and to support staff positions dedicated to this function.

#### **4. Offer two programs: one for young adults, the other for in-school youth.**

Goodwill's Youth Job Connection program currently targets youth between the ages of 14 and 21. This population is difficult to address through a single program because it contains two distinct populations—youth and young adults—which have different needs and require separate approaches. It is our recommendation that Goodwill continue to serve both of these populations, but that it should do so with two unique programs.

##### **Young Adult Program**

First, we recommend that Goodwill serve the young adults (18–24) through a variation of its existing adult services. As legal adults, Goodwill's GED preparation and workforce development services are already open to these individuals but are not necessarily appropriate for them. As young adults, these individuals are not as mature as the adults Goodwill usually serves, and most do not know what they want to do or can do for a career. Therefore, Goodwill should tailor this program to reflect that difference and focus more on emotional development, work readiness, and career exploration. This program could focus on youth who are no longer viewed as being “at risk”, but who have become truly “disconnected”.

##### **Youth Program**

To serve the youth demographic (14-18), we recommend that Goodwill partner with Communities In Schools (CIS), a drop-out prevention program that operates in 44 elementary, middle and high schools in the County, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) to offer a school-based vocational curriculum. Such a program would begin in elementary school teaching youth about the wide range of careers available outside of the world of sports and entertainment. It would expand through middle school with continued emphasis on career awareness and exploration and the addition of soft skills training. The program would culminate in high school with significant soft skills training as well as

“We need to find a way to expose eighth and ninth graders to meaningful work experiences, somehow show them examples or possibilities of careers that will make their school work seem meaningful – a means to an end.”

- Eric Davis, Chair, CMS  
Board of Education

connecting students to expanded options for vocational training and job shadowing or internships. In the beginning, the program would occur after school at the schools in which CIS has a presence but could eventually become integrated into the school day and curriculum of all schools in CMS.

This concept reflects many of the best practices we found in our research (intervene early and emphasize the relevance of what youth are being taught to keep them engaged in school through graduation, cultivate realistic career goals and role models, provide experience in a work setting, etc.). Offering the program in CIS schools also solves many of the problems we found with the existing program by decentralizing the services greatly and easing the transportation burden currently on parents; distancing the program from the larger Goodwill organization and reducing the

stigma the name Goodwill brings; and increasing awareness of the program and widening the pool of participants. This approach would focus on youth who are “at-risk” and help prevent them from becoming “disconnected”.

## CONCLUSION

The recommendations presented in the preceding section include approaches that Goodwill could incorporate into its own programs and then make available to other service providers for replication. A second and even more challenging step would be for Goodwill to assume a significant coordinating function for all of the providers of services to the 14 to 24 age group. Research identifies a clear need for coordination and collaboration, yet little is being done by any of the entities involved in delivering youth services in Mecklenburg County. Goodwill could build a foundation for a collaborative system through the development of a model curriculum, a partnership with CIS and CMS, and by tackling two of the most glaring shortcomings in the programs currently in operation—tracking program participants and developing work experience opportunities.

The barriers preventing many youth from making a successful transition to adulthood have existed for decades and have persisted in many communities despite repeated efforts to eliminate them. The communities that have successfully served at-risk and disconnected youth have done so through the establishment of a comprehensive community-wide approach to the allocation of resources and the delivery of services. While this report has offered many recommendations on ways Goodwill can maximize the impact of its programs for youth, it is hoped that Goodwill will set a long-term goal of facilitating or supporting a collaboration between all stakeholders in Mecklenburg County.

While the steps recommended for Goodwill lead toward such a system, deliberate actions to involve other programs and resources will need to be initiated by Goodwill and by other major partners like CMS, elected officials, and public and private employers. A comprehensive tracking system would be invaluable in securing this support through the provision of data on the youth that are and are not being served. It would document the extent of the problem and underscore the necessity of a unified approach. Such data would likely show that while at-risk youth are involved in programs, they are still sadly underserved. Even more tragic are the disconnected youth who continue to fall between the cracks altogether.

It is an obvious conclusion that it will require the collective resources of many public and private entities working together to begin to offer significant opportunities for a better life to these young people. The need is critical and the resources to tackle this community crisis are available. We hope that this report serves as a “call to action” for leadership and a county-wide collaboration to ensure our youth the future they deserve.