

Impact Guidance Letter: Connected to School

Objective: Increase the number of students staying connected to school (grades 4–9)

2030 target: Ensure an additional 50,000 opportunity youth (15–25) are connected to school or work by 2030

Counties served: Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia

Results-based accountability “story behind the curve” (background): Research shows that 60% to 70% of students become “chronically disengaged” in grades 7 and 8. Disconnecting from and dropping out of school is a process, and does not occur overnight. The process often starts prior to a child entering into the school system. Poor academic achievement as early as elementary school is a predictor of dropping out of high school. Additionally, there are many factors that put a student at risk for dropping out of school. All risk factors may not apply to every student. However, research has consistently indicated the following risk factors as variables that lead to a student dropping out of school:

- Low attendance (less than 85%)
- Poor academic performance
- High suspensions and detentions
- Chaotic school/program environment
- Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)
- Low parent engagement
- Work/family demands that interrupt school engagement
- Absence of a supportive adult
- Disconnect between school academics and future career opportunities
- Learning differences

United Way's work to date: United Way knows the importance of drop-out prevention and how to improve out-of-school time quality programs. Through initiatives like the Center for Youth Development, Girls Today Leaders Tomorrow, and the Early Warning Response System, United Way continues to collaborate with partners and funders to build and create access to research-based, high-quality experiences for youth who need extra supports across the region. That said, our region isn't keeping pace with the growing rates of youth disconnection. To amplify our results, we've partnered with key regional stakeholders and set both community- and agency-performance levels to successfully turn this curve in a positive direction.

What works to turn the curve

- Families that are engaged in their child's educational career
- Helping students envision a secure future with career awareness and exposure
- Intentional support for students transitioning from middle school to high school
- Structured opportunities for social-emotional learning
- Research-based academic supports during and outside of the school day
- Positive connections to caring adults (e.g., family members, teachers, mentors, and program leaders)

Required program components

1. Research-based programs focused on career exposure and/or academic supports during or outside of the school day, with youth at risk for disconnection (as listed above), and a demonstrated track record of consistent student participation over time
2. Documented outcomes of career exposure and/or academic supports targeting middle schoolers or those who work with them
3. Strategies to cultivate positive social emotional competencies, as defined by the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL), for youth through intentionally designed program components and positive relationships with caring adults
4. Varied family engagement opportunities
5. Advocacy efforts that contribute to more youth being connected to school or work

Preferred program components

1. Currently delivering trauma-informed services
2. Currently partnering and referring to 2-1-1
3. History of volunteer engagement and/or management
4. Connection to one or more providers in food access, benefit access, or rent, mortgage, and utility assistance
5. Two-generation approach: considering dependents and their caregivers in approach to service delivery
6. Serve meaningful numbers of individuals and/or families living at or below 200% of the federal poverty level and/or communities/neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty (eligible zip codes detailed in the objective applications).

Agency performance measures

How much?

- # of unduplicated youth (grades 4–9) who attended the program for one day or more
- # of unduplicated youth (grades 4–9) who attended the program for one day or more who were identified as being at-risk of disconnection from school
- # of unduplicated youth (grades 4–9) who participated in academic support programming for one day or more
- # of unduplicated youth (grades 4–9) who participated in career exposure programming for one day or more

How well?

- # of unduplicated youth (grades 4–9) with a program attendance rate of at least 60%
- # of unduplicated youth (grades 4–9) with a program attendance rate of at least 60% [*of the students identified as being at risk of disconnection*]
- # of unduplicated youth (grades 4–9) whose parents/caregivers attended family engagement programming

Is anyone better off?

- # of unduplicated youth in grades 4–9 who transitioned to the next grade level on time
- # of unduplicated youth in grades 4–9 who transitioned to the next grade level on time *[of the students identified as being at risk of disconnection]*

In partnership with others, United Way seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. Move the youth development sector toward implementing trauma-informed practices.
2. Expand utilization of 2-1-1 and ensure that it is an accurate and robust access point of information and referral for individuals, families, and community partners in our region.
3. Increase capacity of the OST sector by matching volunteers with opportunities.