

# RESTORING THE AMERICAN DREAM

★ | **A PRESIDENTIAL PLAN TO  
EXPAND OPPORTUNITY**



# INTRODUCTION

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Equal access to opportunity for all Americans is the defining issue of our time. We believe that helping children and young adults achieve their full potential by providing the conditions they need to be successful is the most powerful way to increase economic mobility, close the opportunity gap and create a more resilient, vibrant and competitive country.

When our youth do well, our communities and our nation do well. We all benefit.

Today, the American Dream is at risk for far too many. For millions of Americans, the opportunity gap begins at birth<sup>1</sup> and instead of narrowing over time, the divide widens. Stagnating wages, double-digit youth unemployment, a skills gap and rising income inequality threaten the core tenet of our country: No matter your origins, if you work hard and persevere, you have a fair shot at improving your lot in life.

We recognize that people's talents and goals vary. In a free society, some inequality is unavoidable. But your zip code should not condemn you to an inescapable economic fate. Inequality without the chance for mobility is inefficient and unjust.

We call on all 2016 presidential candidates to make clear their specific plans to restore access to the American Dream for one of our most valuable assets: our youth. Guided by bipartisan, cross-sector solutions that work across the country -- from cities and suburbs to rural settings and tribal lands -- the priorities outlined below reflect our vision of how we become a true opportunity nation.

While not every solution must or should be solved through legislation or by government alone, each will be enhanced and results accelerated by presidential leadership.

These are 12 actions a President from either party can take to increase opportunity in America.

## **THESE ARE** **12** **ACTIONS THE NEXT** **PRESIDENT CAN TAKE TO** **EXPAND OPPORTUNITY** **IN AMERICA**

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<sup>1</sup> Raj Chetty, [Equality of Opportunity Project](#)

# ELEVATE OPPORTUNITY

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Instead of duplicating efforts, the White House Office of Opportunity will streamline, coordinate and accelerate the most promising practices designed to help Americans access meaningful education and career pathways and overcome obstacles to success; the Office will also eliminate those that are not effective. Currently many of these solutions are siloed at various departments and agencies including, but not limited to: Education; Health and Human Services; Labor; Commerce; Justice; Veteran Affairs; Housing; and Transportation.

The Office of Opportunity will identify and promote bipartisan and cross-sector solutions and will engage directly not just with federal departments and agencies but also with employers and business organizations, nonprofits, educational institutions and philanthropy to identify programs and policies that will increase economic mobility and reduce youth disconnection and income inequality.

We believe that federal policy should be designed to increase efficiency and results. Integrating innovative initiatives like pay-for-performance models into federal programs has the potential to change the status quo by ensuring that federal funding is linked to results and outcomes. Under pay-for-performance models, government dollars are paid out when providers achieve intended results for the people they serve. Programs enjoy flexibility and, in return, receive federal support based on the extent to which they meet performance measures.

## 01

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### ESTABLISH THE WHITE HOUSE OFFICE OF OPPORTUNITY

#### Goals of this Office:

- Break down bureaucratic and institutional barriers that impede the progress of efforts to increase economic mobility and opportunity
- Foster cross-sector and bipartisan cooperation
- Amplify effective solutions and evidence-based practices from across the country
- Eliminate ineffective and inefficient approaches
- Establish clear targets while empowering states and local communities to meet them

# CONNECT YOUTH

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High rates of youth disconnection<sup>2</sup> and double-digit youth unemployment<sup>3</sup> rates harm not just the rising generation, but also the social fabric of our communities and the competitiveness of our nation. In many cases, we recognize that for millions of young Americans, the risk for disconnection from school and work begins at birth.

The personal and collective costs of youth disconnection are steep. Young Americans who are not in school or working cost taxpayers an estimated \$93 billion annually and \$1.6 trillion over their lifetimes<sup>4</sup> in lost revenues and increased social services. The global economy requires that all students complete high school (or earn a diploma equivalent) and receive some form of postsecondary training - such as apprenticeships, certificates, associate or bachelor degrees - to get a job and build a career that pays family-sustaining wages.

There is no one reason youth become disconnected from multiple pathways to success, which include career and technical education, community college, national service or a traditional bachelor's degree. Solutions to youth disconnection must also be diverse and can include mentoring, dual-enrollment programs and apprenticeships.

## 02

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### UPDATE CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Advance policy initiatives<sup>5</sup> that would expand and improve hands-on, modernized career and technical education for all students. Increased collaboration among K-12 education, postsecondary education and the private sector, which understands the broad workforce needs of the community, will provide students with opportunities to gain academic and technical skills needed to succeed in postsecondary education, training and employment.

## 03

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### INCENTIVIZE EMPLOYERS TO HIRE AND TRAIN YOUTH

Offer tax credits to businesses that create apprenticeship programs linked to local workforce needs. Encourage government procurement officers and private-sector businesses to contract services with organizations that employ “opportunity youth” who are most at risk for disconnection from work and school. (These at-risk groups include, but are not limited to: low-income; special education; disabled; foster care children and those aging out of the system; and post-adjudicated youth.)

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<sup>2</sup> Opportunity Nation, [Youth Disconnection](#)

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Sum, Brookings, [The Plummeting Labor Market Fortunes of Teens and Young Adults](#), March 2014

<sup>4</sup> United We Serve, [The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth](#), Jan 2012

<sup>5</sup> Association for Career and Technical Education, [CTE Fact Sheet](#)

# 04

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## ENCOURAGE CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Incentivize collaboration<sup>6</sup> among schools, employers and local workforce investment boards to leverage expertise and resources to encourage opportunities that can help students and youth who have left school but want to re-enroll and graduate to find a pathway to a meaningful career that includes access to internships and apprenticeships. Help all young adults understand their education and career options.

# 05

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## PROVIDE COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM DESIGN AND WRAP-AROUND SUPPORT SERVICES

Given the wide range of needs and unique challenges facing many youth who are off-track or who did not graduate from high school, it is essential to ensure the right combination of services are available for all young adults. This includes offering students flexible schedules; pathways to reduce “seat time barriers” by allowing students to graduate without having spent a specific period of time in a classroom; re-entry programs for youth who have dropped out of school; and alternative programs provided outside the regular high school setting.

Also needed are “early warning systems” that identify students at risk of dropping out and provide them with services designed to keep them in school and help ensure their continued progress. Schools and communities must work together to provide wrap-around support services. These include academic and career planning; mentoring; tutoring; summer employment programs; work-based learning experiences; mental health and other academic, career and social supports demonstrated to be effective in helping students in graduate or assisting dropouts in reenter school and complete a high school education.

# 06

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## ADVANCE JUVENILE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

Support bipartisan policy solutions that give offenders a second chance at the American Dream by demonstrating the value to employers and communities of hiring young offenders and by removing barriers such as eliminating restrictive licensing requirements and expunging records that could prevent a young offender from advancing on the education and career pathways ladder. Criminal justice reform would prevent youthful mistakes from turning into a lifetime of crime and help young adults who commit crimes become more self-reliant and contribute to their community in positive ways.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Uri Berliner, NPR.org, [In South Carolina, A Program That Makes Apprenticeships Work](#), Nov 2013

<sup>7</sup> Opportunity Nation, [Youth Justice](#)

# EXPAND ACCESS

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Strengthening access to education and skills training is essential for young adults to secure a job that will allow them to achieve self-sufficiency and the American Dream. Jobs and career ladders that can sustain a family represent the ultimate source of economic security. To achieve this goal, we must strengthen pipelines of opportunity, starting at birth through adulthood, and support parents, families and communities. Expanding access to early education programs, as well as job skills training and education after high school, implementing smart tax policies, expanding financial literacy and encouraging savings, and increasing Internet access will help more low- and moderate-income Americans gain a foothold on the path to economic security and independence.

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## 07

### **EXPAND ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR LOW- AND MODERATE-INCOME FAMILIES**

Across the country, there is strong bipartisan support<sup>8</sup> for investments in high-quality pre-kindergarten by both elected officials and by voters. Investing in early childhood education is a critical component to advancing two generations<sup>9</sup> in a family, particularly for young parents. Support for expanding pre-k is buoyed by powerful research about child brain development<sup>10</sup> in the early years; short and long-term academic and social benefits; and overall cost effectiveness for local, state and federal governments. Now is the time to act by ensuring that all low- and moderate-income children have access to high-quality early education programs.

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## 08

### **IMPROVE AFFORDABILITY, QUALITY AND FINANCIAL AID ACCESS IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

Every young American needs some form of training or education after high school in order to get a good job and advance up the career ladder. But higher education remains out of reach for too many young adults. Promote efforts to revamp remedial education; hold institutions accountable for results; and promote broader access to apprenticeships and postsecondary programs, particularly in STEM, business, advanced manufacturing and health care fields.

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<sup>8</sup> Edsource.org, [Early Childhood Education Is A Top Priority For Voters](#)

<sup>9</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, [Creating Opportunity for Families: A Two Generation Approach](#), Nov 2014

<sup>10</sup> Harvard University, [Brain Architecture](#)

# 09

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## **SUPPORT COLLEGE SAVINGS PLANS FOR LOW-INCOME CHILDREN**

For many families, saving for education, a home or retirement is key to making economic progress.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, most low-income families lack the resources to save for the future. Research shows that low-income children who have a college savings account in their names are at least three times more likely to attend college<sup>12</sup> and four times more likely to graduate than their peers who lack such higher education savings accounts for various forms of training and education after high school.

# 10

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## **EXPAND AND MAKE PERMANENT THE EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT**

Recognized as one of the most effective anti-poverty programs of the past 40 years, the EITC<sup>13</sup> has benefited millions of low-income families and should be expanded to help lift more Americans out of poverty, particularly adults without children and non-custodial parents who currently are shut out of this program.

# 11

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## **ACCELERATE ACCESS TO HIGH-SPEED INTERNET**

Several studies have shown that fast, reliable Internet access is essential to modern life, including applying for jobs, accessing services and managing finances. This is particularly important for students, residents in rural areas and low-income communities, and small businesses. Yet many Americans still lack this essential service. Bridging the “digital divide” by expanding access to high-speed Internet remains an important goal in order to expand opportunity to more Americans.<sup>14</sup>

# 12

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## **STRENGTHEN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNITIES**

Cross-sector initiatives that promote volunteering and national service—and equal access to such opportunities—among all young adults can promote upward mobility and contribute to a range of positive outcomes that benefit both the individual and the community. Increased civic engagement can reduce youth disconnection and help young adults gain the skills and experience they need to embark on meaningful career pathways and bridge the growing opportunity divide.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> J.B. Wogan, Governing.com, [Will San Francisco's Kindergartner Bank Accounts Catch On?](#), May 2013

<sup>12</sup> CFED, [Child Savings Accounts](#)

<sup>13</sup> Hilary Hoynes, Brookings, [Building on the Success of the Earned Income Tax Credit](#), June 2014

<sup>14</sup> Jack Karsten, Brookings, [ConnectHome Initiative Acknowledges Economic Necessity of Internet Access](#), July 2015

<sup>15</sup> Opportunity Nation, [Connecting Youth and Strengthening Communities](#), Sept 2014

# CONCLUSION

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The expansion of opportunity must be a shared priority among all sectors, all political parties and all age groups, as it goes to the heart of not only our national identity but also our economic health and international competitiveness. Yet the President has a unique ability to elevate this goal through the Office of Opportunity and to encourage bipartisan, cross-sector collaboration that will benefit all Americans.

That is why we call on the next President of the United States to restore the promise of the American Dream by elevating opportunity, connecting youth and expanding access to upward mobility. By strengthening pathways for our future workforce, innovators, policymakers and leaders, and recognizing that we need all our talent on the field to keep our country competitive and vibrant, we will capture the best of the United States and become a true opportunity nation.



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Opportunity Nation is a bipartisan, national coalition of more than 350 businesses, nonprofits, educational institutions and community leaders working to expand economic opportunity. Opportunity Nation seeks to close the opportunity gap by amplifying the work of its coalition members, advocating policy and private sector actions, and releasing the annual Opportunity Index, a comprehensive measure of economic, civic and educational measures at the state and county levels.