



OUR OPPORTUNITY NATION

A Plan to Fulfill America's Dream
as an Opportunity Nation



SIGNATORIES

We, the undersigned, support this Opportunity Nation Plan of Action to close the opportunity gap in America. By signing, our organizations express our support for this comprehensive, evidence-based and bipartisan approach, not necessarily endorsing every policy or statement in this plan, but endorsing the overall purpose and spirit.

American Association of Community Colleges

America Forward

America's Promise Alliance

American Red Cross, Hero Care Network

Amp Your Good

Armed Forces Services Corporation

Be The Change, Inc.

BELL

Blue Engine

Blue Star Families

Bottom Line

BUILD

Center For Supportive Schools

Children Now

Child Care Aware of America

Citizen Schools

City Fresh Foods, Inc.

City Year

Civic

Civic Enterprises

College Advising Corps

College Possible

Compass Working Capital

Corporation for Enterprise Development

Creating IT Futures Foundation

Des Moines Area Community College

District Alliance of Youth Advocates

Eagle Rock School & Professional Development Center

Earth Conservation Corps

Education Resource Strategies

Empower Schools

Empowerment Through Education

Every Child Matters

Feeding America

Future Chefs

Gateway to College National Network

Generation Citizen

Generations United

Get Schooled

GI Film Festival

Global Citizen Year

Grab The Torch

Green City Force

Grossman Marketing Group

GTECH Strategies

Habitat for Humanity

Hispanic Heritage Foundation

Hunger Free America

"I Have A Dream" Foundation

Innovate+Educate

Jobs for the Future

Juma Ventures

Jumpstart

LeadersUp

Libraries Without Borders

LIFT

LA Valley College Family Resource Center

Martha's Table

MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership

MentorCloud

Miami Dade College

Michigan League for Public Policy

Monroe Community College

More Than Words

My Brother's Keeper Alliance

National Academy Foundation

National Center on Time & Learning

National Conference on Citizenship

National Council of Young Leaders

National Military Family Association

National Youth Employment Coalition

New Door Ventures

New Profit

One Million Degrees

OneFamily

Peace First

People 4 People Productions

Phalen Leadership Academies

Philadelphia Youth Network

Phipps Neighborhoods

Points of Light

ProInspire

Project GRAD Los Angeles

Public Allies

Operation HOPE

Reach Out and Read

REDF

Repair the World

Save the Children Action Network

Service Never Sleeps

Service Year Alliance

Share Our Strength

Solid Ground

Spark

Strong Women, Strong Girls

Student Veterans of America

Summer Advantage USA

Summer Search

Super Service Challenge

Teach for America

The Corps Network

The Future Project

The George Nethercutt Foundation

The Internship Institute

The Mission Continues

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

The National Crittenton Foundation

The Possible Project

The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors

uAspire

United Nations Association of the United States of America

Urban Alliance

Voices for National Service

Year Up

Youth Service America

YouthBuild USA

Zoomdojo

As of August 25, 2016

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A special thanks to the Opportunity Nation Coalition and Opportunity Leaders for their work and dedication in communities across the country. It is your leadership that makes Opportunity Nation possible.

Designed by: Jennifer Byrne, Live.Create.Play. LLC



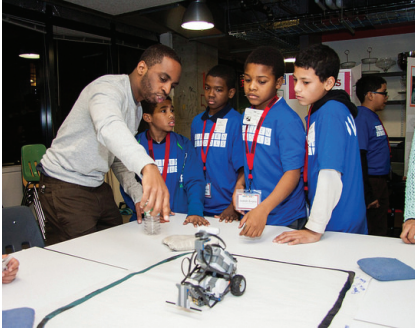


Photo courtesy of: Citizen Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The American Dream is in jeopardy. While some progress has been made along the success sequence of graduating from high school, gaining some post-secondary education, and securing employment, for too many Americans the land of opportunity is out of reach. A person's zip code should not determine his or her future.

This Opportunity Nation plan sets forth policies that are evidence-based, bipartisan, and cross-sector. Developed and supported by the Opportunity Nation Coalition, this plan draws on ideas from many leaders, practitioners, institutions, bipartisan plans, and the perspectives and initiatives of young people, particularly those who have experienced poverty.

The plan highlights the barriers to fulfilling the American Dream, six bold "Opportunity Millennium Goals," and policies to boost opportunity presented in the order of the life cycle and success sequence of children, youth, and families.

Tested ideas have emerged to address America's opportunity gap. Building on progress made in the developing world on Sustainable Development Goals, the Opportunity Nation Coalition proposes six Opportunity Millennium Goals to be achieved in the United States in the coming decade:

1. No child hungry or homeless by 2025
2. Achieve a 90 percent high school graduation rate by 2020 and turnaround all low-performing schools by 2025
3. Double the number of post-secondary degrees, certificates and industry credentials by 2025
4. Reduce the unemployment rate to below five percent for all, and cut the child poverty rate in half within a decade
5. Re-engage one million opportunity youth each year by 2025
6. Engage one million Americans in national service within a decade

The Opportunity Nation Coalition advances concrete policies both to address these goals and to take immediate steps to address an American Dream in crisis. These policies will help:

- Expand access to high quality early childhood education for low- and moderate-income children and families
- Strengthen and invest in families
- Ensure every child has a home
- Ensure no child goes through the school day hungry
- Increase the high school graduation rate and facilitate the entry of graduates into post-secondary education or training
- Reconnect one million opportunity youth each year to education, employment, service and leadership

- Update career and technical education (CTE) and incentivize employers to hire and train youth
- Improve affordability, quality, and financial aid access in post-secondary education
- Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit
- Advance juvenile and criminal justice reform
- Promote socioeconomic integration and desegregation
- Strengthen civic engagement through action-based civic education
- Strengthen opportunity through service years

In the coming months and years, the Opportunity Nation Coalition will mobilize leaders and institutions across sectors to meet these goals and advance these policies to boost opportunity for more Americans.

The American Dream is in Jeopardy

The land of opportunity is at a crossroads. Overall opportunity in America has increased by nine percent since 2011, when we first released the Opportunity Index, an annual measure of opportunity. More Americans have jobs, are graduating from high school, and are gaining post-secondary education. At the same time, there are higher rates of poverty and income inequality as well as lower median family incomes. For far too many, America's promise of equal opportunity for all seems out of reach. The challenge of Opportunity Nation and its partners is to see that in America, an individual's zip code need not determine his or her destiny. America's promise of equality of opportunity is a moral commitment, as well as a social and economic one.

Today, one in three Americans live in poverty or on the economic brink¹ and one in five children living in the country are poor.² Many young people grow up in places of concentrated poverty with poor housing and health conditions, high rates of crime, and low-performing schools, making it more difficult to complete their education or access employment. Compounding these circumstances, many communities have very low levels of social and institutional trust. For the first time in at least 50 years, a majority of our public school children are living in poverty.³ Half of all Americans will experience at least one year of poverty or teeter on the edge during their working years.⁴ Add in those who will turn to programs in the social safety net or experience at least one year of unemployment, and that number jumps to 70 percent.⁵

Children born to low-income parents tend to remain in the bottom quintile of household income throughout their lives. Fewer than five percent reach the top income bracket,⁶ the lowest rate of social mobility in decades. Family background is now more predictive of social capital and social mobility than ever before. Among racial and ethnic groups, African Americans have the highest poverty rate at more than 26 percent, followed by Hispanics at more than 23 percent and whites at just over 10 percent.⁷ Nearly 42 percent of

The Opportunity Index

Where you live shouldn't determine how far you can go in life. The Opportunity Index is the nation's first—and only—tool to holistically measure opportunity comparable across states and counties. Connecting multiple economic, educational, and civic factors, the Index is a powerful way for communities to track and advance opportunity.

"The prospects for the next generation—that is, whether young people from different backgrounds are, in fact, getting onto the ladder at about the same place and, given equal merit and energy, are equally likely to scale it—pose an altogether more momentous problem in our national culture."¹²

Robert Putnam

young black children (under age six) live in poverty, compared to 14 percent of white children.⁸ Even strivers—high-achieving low-income students—have worse outcomes than their middle- and higher-income peers from pre-K through college and have consequently fewer employment opportunities.⁹

Today, young Americans ages 16-24 are experiencing unacceptably high unemployment rates that are at least twice the national average. According to the Opportunity Index, 5.5 million young Americans are neither in school nor working. By some estimates, as many as three million of these Opportunity Youth are living in poverty.¹⁰ The Great Recession has hit young Americans particularly hard. By one calculation, young people ages 20 to 24 will lose about \$21.4 billion in earnings over the next 10 years. Youth connection is one of the most powerful indicators of a community's level of opportunity. When more young people are in school or working, the higher that region's Opportunity Score. Conversely, in places where levels of youth disconnection are high, Opportunity Scores drop. This disconnection is exacerbated by the high incarceration rates of poor Americans. More incarcerated parents and youth leads to a cycle of recidivism, poverty, and high barriers to education and employment.

As Robert Putnam catalogues in *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, the opportunity gap has widened dramatically in America.¹¹ Class divides—in economic security, family structure, parenting, schooling and neighborhoods—have nearly brought upward mobility to a halt.

"Contemporary discussion of inequality in America often conflates two related but distinct issues—equality of income and wealth and equality of opportunity and social mobility. Historically... most Americans have not been greatly worried about [income and wealth] inequality: we tend not to begrudge others their success or care how high the socioeconomic ladder is, assuming that everyone has an equal chance to climb it, given equal merit and energy. The prospects for the next generation—that is, whether young people from different backgrounds are, in fact, getting onto the ladder at about the same place and, given equal merit and energy, are equally likely to scale it—pose an altogether more momentous problem in our national culture."¹²

As citizens across the country prepare to decide our next chapter, closing the opportunity gap should be at the center of our local, state, and national debates. With rising tensions and pockets of violence in some communities and historically low levels of social and institutional trust, the time could not be more urgent. Individuals, families, educators, employers, and nonprofit and faith-based leaders in local neighborhoods and communities must take action and work together to boost the life outcomes of low-income children and youth and their families. Those individuals who society is trying to help climb the ladders of mobility must also be at the center of developing solutions that work. A wellspring of energy, solutions, and innovation from local communities and states should put greater pressure on our local, state, and national leaders in government. Policymakers from across party lines

and leaders from all sectors of American society must come together to develop and promote innovative, evidence-based strategies to reinvigorate the American Dream and return the country's promise of opportunity for all. Together we must agree that every child's future is too important to be decided by circumstance of birth.

Leaders and Experts Emerge to Expand Opportunity

Many communities across America are organizing efforts to improve outcomes for children and youth. Some states are leading the way in policies, reforms and initiatives to address poverty and boost economic mobility. Since 2009, Opportunity Nation and its Coalition of more than 330 organizations, have been working together to increase public awareness of opportunity gaps and develop policies and tools to help close them. The Opportunity Index is an annual composite measure, at the state and county level, of economic, educational, and civic factors that foster opportunity and is designed to help identify concrete solutions to lagging conditions to prompt opportunity and upward mobility.

From around the country and across the aisle, national experts and leaders have renewed efforts to address this threat to America's promise of equal opportunity. In 2015, scholars from the **American Enterprise Institute** and **The Brookings Institution** issued a report from their Working Group on Poverty and Opportunity entitled, *Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream*. Following the release of *Our Kids* in 2015, Robert Putnam and his Saguaro Seminar at the **Harvard Kennedy School of Government** convened top experts into working groups to distill the best evidence-based ideas for narrowing the opportunity gap in five areas: family and parenting, early childhood, K-12 education, community institutions, and on-ramps like community college and apprenticeships. In 2016, the Saguaro Seminar issued a report entitled, *Closing the Opportunity Gap*.

In 2015, the bipartisan **National Commission on Hunger** provided recommendations to Congress and the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture on how to end hunger in America. The **Jack Kemp Foundation** convened the Kemp Forum on Expanding Opportunity with House Speaker Ryan and Senator Tim Scott in January 2016. In June 2016, Speaker Paul Ryan and the House Republican Caucus released *A Better Way: Our Vision for a Confident America*, a plan to address poverty, opportunity, and upward mobility. In the same month, the **Center for American Progress** released *A Progressive Agenda to Cut Poverty and Expand Opportunity*. Also in 2016, **The Bridgespan Group** released the report, *Billion Dollar Bets to Create Opportunity for Every American*.

In 2012, the **National Council of Young Leaders** was formed and later released *Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America*. In 2016, **Foster Club**, a network of more than 44,000

A Focus on Poverty and Economic Mobility

2012

Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America, National Council of Young Leaders

2015

Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream, American Enterprise Institute and The Brookings Institution

Our Kids, Robert Putnam

National Commission on Hunger

2016

Kemp Forum on Expanding Opportunity, The Jack Kemp Foundation

A Better Way: Our Vision for a Confident America, Speaker Paul Ryan and House Republican Caucus

A Progressive Agenda to Cut Poverty and Expand Opportunity, The Center for American Progress

Powerful Voices, Sharing Our Stories to Reform Child Welfare, Foster Club

Billion Dollar Bets to Create Economic Opportunity for Every American, The Bridgespan Group

We need to commit to these ideas and encourage our political leaders to embrace this common ground and take action.

foster youth, released the report, *Powerful Voices, Sharing Our Stories to Reform Child Welfare*. **The National Youth Leadership Council, Youth Service America, Close Up** and other organizations have been working effectively to engage youth in policymaking and leadership development. The perspectives of young people have been critical in shaping this plan.

The country has a vast set of fresh ideas and bipartisan plans to expand opportunity for more Americans. While there is not agreement on everything, agreement has emerged on a set of ideas that can make a meaningful difference in expanding opportunity. We need to commit to these ideas and encourage our political leaders to embrace this common ground and take action. Drawing on the extraordinary and timely work of these plans and other leaders and institutions, we outline in this report our principles, goals and plans to advance opportunity. We want to accelerate both dialogue and action around restoring equal access to the American Dream and to measure progress in counties, states, and the nation over time. The future of our children, families, communities, economy, and nation are at stake.

Progress, Not Politics

The proposals in this plan take ideas and policies from leading policymakers and thought leaders on both sides of the aisle. The ideas are **evidence-based, bipartisan** and **cross-sector**. We also draw from young people themselves, particularly those who have experienced poverty and other life challenges. The powerful principles that guide their plan guide ours as well: “love, responsibility, forgiveness and empathy, community empowerment, inclusion, respect for faith, humility, and accountability for results.”¹³

This plan highlights the best evidence-based ideas for expanding opportunity for low-income individuals and their families—to encourage leaders at all levels to continue to gather data about the practices, policies and programs that will produce the most effective results; to invest limited taxpayer dollars in what works; and to direct funds away from those efforts that consistently fail to achieve measurable results. According to a recent survey by the General Accounting Office, only 37 percent of federal program managers said that an evaluation of their program had been conducted in the past five years.¹⁴ In addition, analysis has shown that less than one of every 100 dollars of government spending is backed by even the most basic evidence.¹⁵ Progress is being made to build the evidence base for many programs, building on the work of many administrations. At a time of fiscal scarcity and partisan bickering, evidence-based policymaking can ensure federal dollars are being used to support effective programs and to foster an environment of continuous learning to improve outcomes for low-income youth and their families over time.

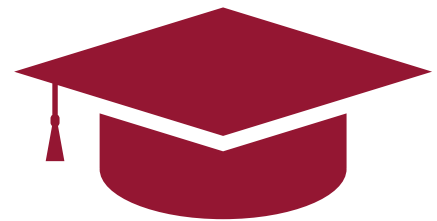
Government can’t do this work alone. Creating our Opportunity Nation requires drawing on the best of three sectors—public, private and nonprofit—working together in new partnerships and each doing what they do best. The task at hand is too important and urgent for private sector and business

leaders to remain on the sidelines and leave all the work for federal, state, and local officials. To ensure that every child has access to the same level of opportunity, it will take cross-sector partnerships and innovations, through public-private partnerships and other forward-thinking initiatives at every level. Collective impact and other collaborative models of public-private partnerships are growing in communities across America to close opportunity gaps. We need to learn from all of these efforts and replicate and scale those that work and demonstrate results.

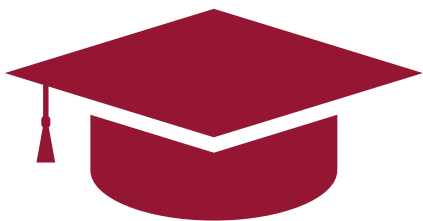
Opportunity Millennium Goals to Restore the American Dream for All

This plan articulates six bold goals to focus the country's attention on America's opportunity crisis and to galvanize all sectors to be accountable over the next decade in addressing it. Each goal already has a coalition working to achieve it and is backed by evidence. We believe that by articulating these goals as a group and uniting concerned citizens, leaders and organizations from all sectors in an overall commitment to achieving each of them within the next decade, we can make a significant leap toward restoring the American Dream for all.

- 1. No Child Hungry or Homeless by 2025:** To break the cycle of poverty early in a child's life, America must address two unacceptable conditions—child hunger and child homelessness. Both challenges are largely invisible, silent epidemics. Remarkably, one in five children in America—16 million total—do not get the food they need every day.¹⁶ **Share our Strength** has been working to show the country that ending childhood hunger is possible and would significantly increase Opportunity Index scores in communities. More than 1.3 million K-12 students are homeless, creating a highly disruptive phenomenon that threatens their success in school, work and life.¹⁷ These two problems, which are fixable, take a terrible toll on the health and development of young people, and threaten their futures in profound ways. These problems also drag down our nation's economy by perpetuating the cycle of poverty. We believe that the school community offers a powerful means for providing students the supports they need.
- 2. Achieve a 90 Percent High School Graduation Rate for All Students by 2020 and Turn Around Every Low-Performing School by 2025:** While the nation continues to reach record high graduation rates, significant graduation gaps remain for economically disadvantaged students, minorities, those with disabilities, English Language Learners and homeless students compared to their peers. We need to do more to ensure graduating students are prepared for college. Due to the efforts of organizations like **America's Promise Alliance (APA)** and its many partners, progress is being made. After 30 years of flatlining high school graduation rates, and more than 1.2 million students dropping out of high school every year since 2001, the national high school graduation rate has seen an increase from 71 percent in 2001 to 82.3 percent in 2014, with two million more students graduating from high school rather than dropping out over this time period. According to the Opportunity Index, national on-time high school graduation rates increased nine percent since 2011. Students who do not graduate from high school are much more likely to



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According to the 2015 Opportunity Index, 45 states and the District of Columbia increased the number of adults ages 25 or older who had earned at least an associate's degree.

Given the needs of our economy for skilled workers, organizations like the Lumina Foundation are focused on the goal to increase both post-secondary certificates, degrees, and other credentials by 2025 as well as to ensure these degrees are high quality.

live in poverty than those with diplomas. Accordingly, APA and its partners pushed the country to ensure that a goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate by 2020 is for *all* students, putting them on a path to post-secondary education and employment. Over the last decade, the number of low-performing high schools has dropped from 2,000 to 1,000, with one million fewer students attending these low-performing schools which have graduation rates of 67 percent or less. By adopting the same strategies that hundreds of schools have used to turn themselves around, we can ensure that no high school is low-performing a decade from now and that no student attends a low-performing school.

3. **Double Post-Secondary Degrees, Certificates and Industry Credentials by 2025:**

Given that the majority of jobs will require not only a high school diploma, but also some post-secondary education and training, it is absolutely critical to ensure all students have access to and complete some form of post-secondary certificate or degree, be it an occupational certificate (awards from business, vocational, trade or technical schools or technical, non-degree awards from two and four year colleges),¹⁸ or an associate's, bachelor's or graduate degree. Only one million certificates are awarded each year, when America needs at least twice that number as a pathway to college degrees and employment. Only about 30 percent of students are graduating from two-year institutions within three years and about 58 percent of students are graduating from four-year institutions within six years. **Blue Engine** partners with high schools to prepare more students for post secondary success. Given the needs of our economy for skilled workers, organizations like the **Lumina Foundation** are focused on the goal to increase both post-secondary certificates, degrees, and other credentials by 2025 as well as to ensure these degrees are high quality.

4. **Reduce Unemployment Below Five Percent for All, So Every American Has the Opportunity to Work, and Cut the Child Poverty Rate in Half by 2025:**

The national unemployment rate has shrunk to five percent (what economists deem "full employment," given there will always be a percentage of the population that is in between jobs or that represents a mismatch between worker skills and job requirements). While the Opportunity Index highlights that the unemployment rate has decreased by 44 percent nationally since 2011, important subgroups, including youth, African Americans and low-income Americans, lag well behind. To ensure an equitable economy, populations that have typically been harder to employ must be connected to work and/or education and career training opportunities, especially those who were formerly in fields whose jobs are disappearing as the world moves into a more modern economy. As part of this long-term goal, we also envision cutting the rate of unemployment in half by 2025 for African American and Hispanic youth. **Young Invincibles** amplifies the voices of unemployed young people and provides ideas on how to address this crisis. We note that the "sharing" or "gig" economy is opening up new opportunities for the unemployed to access job opportunities through technology-enabled platforms, including for low-income and minority youth.¹⁹

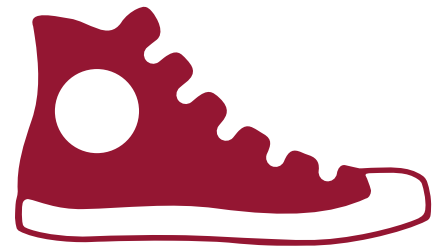
In 1999, the United Kingdom established a national child poverty target, which united the Conservative and Labour parties. Measured in U.S. terms, the UK's Child Poverty Target and resulting policy changes cut Britain's child poverty rate by 50 percent during the effort's first decade (1999-2009). In contrast, the U.S. child poverty rate increased by over 20 percent from 16.2 percent in 2000 to 21.1 percent in 2014. A child poverty target can serve as a rallying cry for the country to take concrete steps to meet this target. It institutionalizes the goal of reducing child poverty and serves as an impetus for public debate around the most effective interventions needed to hit this target.

5. Re-engage One Million Opportunity Youth Each Year by 2025:

Opportunity Youth represent tremendous potential and talent for our communities, economy, and society. If they fail to reconnect to school and work, they will cost taxpayers and society billions of dollars in lost revenue and increased social services. The success of Opportunity Youth is one of three indicators that are most closely associated with high scores on the Opportunity Index, in addition to the poverty rate and the share of adults with at least an associate's degree. **YouthBuild USA, Jobs for the Future, the Forum for Youth Investment and Civic Enterprises** have developed a plan, *The Bridge to Reconnection*, to enable the country to put one million young adults on the path to success.

6. One Million Americans in National Service Every Year in the Next

Decade: Service year programs, including national service programs that receive federal funding through **AmeriCorps, Peace Corps** and **YouthBuild**, enable young adults to engage in sustained, substantial service with a set term, supported by a modest living allowance and other benefits. Service year programs are organized to have an important community impact while making a lasting difference in the lives of those who serve. Evidence shows that these programs have a triple bottom line: first, they help increase opportunity for others by educating children at risk, helping low-income families find the services they need, and building the capacity of community organizations to solve public problems; second, they can unite people of different backgrounds together in common purpose; and third, they can offer transformational opportunities for those who serve, including helping Opportunity Youth reconnect to school and work and become the leaders our nation needs. Efforts are underway to grow full-time, paid, national service for at least one year from 65,000 national service opportunities today to 250,000 within the next five years. This will put us on a path to one million by the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 2026. The **Service Year Alliance**, chaired by General Stanley McChrystal, working in partnership with **Voices for National Service**, has developed a strategy and plan to enable the country to meet this goal. This goal of making a year of service a common opportunity and expectation should also be complemented by efforts to boost the leading indicators of civic health in communities, such as volunteering, community projects, social trust, voting, joining organizations, and associations, and staying informed with the goal of enabling 80 percent of students to benefit from action-based civic learning and service-learning within a decade.



According to the Opportunity Index, in the United States, there are currently more than 5.5 million young people 16-24 years of age who are disconnected from school and work.

Achieving the Goals to Restore the American Dream with Opportunity Ideas that Work

While we believe that America should embrace these goals to advance opportunity for all in the coming decade, we also believe that we need to take immediate, concrete action both to advance them and to address the broader crisis of an American Dream at risk. Across the country, Americans from both political parties and all walks of life, including young people who have experienced poverty and other challenges in life, have put forward ambitious ideas that inform this plan—significant ideas to help children, youth, and families get ahead. We present these ideas in the order of the life cycle and success sequence of children, youth, and families. Some of these policy proposals will advance one or more of the six bold goals. Others present more immediate opportunities to advance a bipartisan agenda in the coming year, as we elect a new president and Congress as well as governors and mayors.



Photo courtesy of: Los Angeles Valley College Family Resource Center

Expand Access to High Quality Early Childhood Education Programs for Low- and Moderate-Income Children and Families

Research has shown that in the first five years a child's brain is far more malleable than later in life. For this reason, a dollar invested in children before kindergarten can have a much greater impact and can help to narrow achievement gaps, especially for students born in lower socio-economic conditions. The National Academy of Sciences in a landmark study wrote, "Virtually every aspect of early human development, from the brain's evolving circuitry to the child's capacity for empathy, is affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood years."²⁰

Research has documented differences in language ability at 18 months of age.²¹ By age five, children born to less-educated parents in the United States have reading and math scores a full standard deviation behind that of their peers born to more educated parents.²² Similarly, by the beginning of kindergarten, children from low-income families often do not perform as well as their more affluent classmates on tests and cognitive ability. Also, they are less likely to pay attention in school and more prone to exhibit problem behaviors.²³

This data points to the imperative that there should be a focus on supporting early childhood development. This includes investing in initiatives that empower families and caregivers as their child's first teacher, and providing access to high quality, evidence-based early childhood education programs for all children. The Opportunity Index shows us that nationwide there were fewer children in preschool in 2015 than in 2011. America currently invests less in children under the age of five than most.

other developed countries²⁴ and is an outlier for its low level of enrollment of children in early education programs.²⁵ Policies that can expand and enhance early childhood education in America include:

- 1. *Testing competing early education programs through experimentation and research and then expanding and investing in programs proven to be effective.*** Widely disseminate information on the best programs so that parents can make informed decisions. The federal government and state governments should conduct experimental studies of how to both expand access to, and maximize the quality of, preschool education. A demonstration project at select Head Start and state pre-K centers could also be undertaken to test best programs. Furthermore, we should also reward high quality Head Start programs while requiring low-quality programs to improve and re-compete for funding, building on the reforms of both the Bush and Obama administrations.
- 2. *Using the nation's universally available network of pediatric primary and preventative care practices to mount evidence-based parent and early child development interventions.*** Today, nearly all infants and toddlers have access to basic health care and receive several well-baby visits over the first three years of life. Pediatricians should supplement these visits with evidence-based parent-child interventions that are proven to promote early childhood development in cognitive language areas and social-emotional skills.
- 3. *Creating a high-quality child care tax credit*** for low- and middle-income families that would be paid directly to high-quality child care providers. In addition, the federal government should work with states to build on the momentum created by the recent bipartisan reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant to continue improving the quality of child care for low-income working parents.
- 4. *Expanding access to high-quality preschool education.*** State governments have significantly expanded and increased investments in public preschool education in recent years, from just four states²⁶ in 1980 to 42 states plus the District of Columbia in 2015.²⁷ However, expansion has come at the expense of quality, or quality has come at the expense of access. Federal and state governments should research strategies to expand access while maintaining quality. In addition, the federal government should work to expand public preschool programs to the few remaining states without such programs by matching state pre-K expenditures up to a certain level for each child enrolled every year.



Photo courtesy of: Los Angeles Valley College Family Resource Center

Strengthen and Invest in Families

Investing in and protecting families is critical to combating generational poverty. There is no single solution to breaking the cycle of poverty in families. By providing comprehensive services and conditions that support families, we can increase the chances of parents raising children who will succeed in education, career, and life. One of the most powerful ways to increase economic mobility is through a two-generation approach to policy development which ensures that the range of needs for both children and parents are met in strategic ways that allow multiple generations to achieve successful outcomes under the same initiative.

"I was born in a small border town known as Nogales, Arizona, but raised in Nogales, Mexico. In 2000, when I was seven years old, my family risked moving permanently to Tucson, Arizona, in search of a better future. We left everything we owned in the small motel room where I spent my childhood. When we arrived in Tucson, we had no money, no place to go, no place to call home."

— Opportunity Leader
Bill De La Rosa

Bill recently graduated from Bowdoin College with a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and Latin American Studies. A Mexican-American, and a first generation college student, he is a Gates Millennium Scholar, a John Lewis Fellow, and a Harry S. Truman Scholar. In April 2016, he was named the national Hispanic Scholar of the Year. He is currently working as a Policy Analyst for the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation before pursuing a master's degree in Migration Studies from the University of Oxford in the fall of 2017.

Over the past 40 years, the rate of childbirths to unmarried women has nearly tripled.²⁸ Many young people become parents before they say they are ready. Seven in ten teen births are to 18–19 year olds and unintended pregnancy rates are highest among young women ages 18–24, low-income women, and those who did not graduate high school. Children who grow up in families that aren't socioeconomically prepared to parent face a myriad of disadvantages, including less parental time, heightened levels of stress, less confidence in the future, an increased likelihood to act out, worse performance in school, and a higher tendency to engage in risky behaviors.²⁹ At the same time, we know that following the "success sequence"—graduating from high school, then finding work, then getting married, and finally having children—nearly guarantees that a family will stay out of poverty.

We must listen to the perspective of young people who are experiencing these changes in the family structure. Opportunity Youth United put it this way:

"In our experience the reality of family has changed, and so has the definition of family. Most of us do not have two parents. In our families the oldest boy is the man, siblings raise siblings, foster care or grandparent care is common. We deal with negative family influences daily, including drugs and alcohol, unemployment, dependency, and poverty. The family once influenced and defined society. Now it seems that various forces in society have broken our families.

For children and youth to overcome these negative influences, society must find ways to answer our deep need for human connection. Every child needs a father or another strong positive male influence, and we all need a mother, someone to talk to, someone to hug us, whether it's a blood relationship or not. We need something we can call a family, where we know that people care about us. We are struggling to answer the questions "who am I" and "what's my purpose in life?" We need people to help us answer these questions.

In a larger sense, we also need to belong to a more united society with a positive culture that does not discriminate against people based on race or culture, income level, or residential zip code, and where neighbors take an interest in each other and help each other. We understand this is a big challenge. Neighbors are more afraid of helping each other than they used to be."³⁰

While promoting marriage is valuable to combat generational poverty, there are many ways to strengthen the American family. Specific recommendations include:

1. **Expanding access to evidence-based home visitation programs** like the Nurse Family Partnership and Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program. Home visitation programs like the Nurse Family Partnership are associated with better birth outcomes, increased parenting techniques that include taking more actions to promote early language

and literacy, and higher grade point averages that increase the likelihood to graduate from high school in the long term.³¹

2. **Reinforcing the importance of parent-child interactions, starting in infancy** through pediatric-based programs, such as **Reach Out and Read**, an evidence-based model that leverages well-child check-ups through age five to promote literacy and encourage families to engage with each other through reading aloud.
3. **Reducing teen and unplanned pregnancies through evidence-based approaches.** Teen pregnancy has dropped more than 50 percent over two decades, and there is encouraging recent progress in reducing unplanned pregnancy. To continue the momentum and address the remaining disparities in communities with high rates of teen and unplanned pregnancy, it is important to expand the reach and creativity of these efforts. This includes both scaling effective approaches and continuing to invest in innovation to most effectively meet the needs of disconnected youth where the need is greatest. The programs identified by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Teen Pregnancy Prevention Evidence Review and currently funded through the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program and Personal Responsibility Education Program are successful examples. This list offers states and communities a wide range of program models so they can choose one that fits their circumstances and population. In addition, a growing number of programs, such as **AIM 4 Teen Moms**,³² have demonstrated success in reducing unplanned pregnancy through information and education, as well as through access to effective family planning.
4. **Ensuring assistance programs don't penalize marriage.** Currently, many programs actually penalize marriage when a couple's combined income reduces or eliminates their eligibility for assistance. Public assistance, like the tax code, should remain neutral towards marriage.
5. **Expanding quality mentoring relationships to children from all socio-economic backgrounds.** According to **MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership**, mentors are a critical means of establishing stable support and helping to improve positive outcomes for at-risk youth. One in three young people do not have a mentor and for at-risk youth who often face poverty, under-resourced communities, and other challenges, mentoring relationships are even more limited. Evidence shows that high-quality mentoring makes a difference —at-risk young people with mentors were more likely to aspire to attend and enroll in college, were more likely to report participating in sports and other extracurricular activities, and were more likely to report taking leadership roles in school and extracurricular activities and to regularly volunteer in their communities. Mentoring, when integrated into national initiatives, can be utilized to help improve positive outcomes for youth including reducing truancy rates, expanding educational attainment, and addressing poverty.

"Amy Carrier's mentorship during high school reconnected me to learning after facing obstacles in middle school. She shared personal life experiences and taught useful self-sufficiency topics like financial literacy that have helped my decision making. Amy's mentorship changed my life and still informs my work with her on the Empowerment Through Education Initiative."

— Opportunity Leader
Antionetta Kelley

Antionetta Kelley believes that offering a 21st century skills curriculum to students is a social justice issue. Antionetta is a graduate of the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the Education Policy and Management program.



Photo courtesy of: Share Our Strength

Ensure No Child Goes Through the School Day Hungry

In 2014, 15.3 million children lived in households that were food-insecure at some point during the year.³³ While schools offer free and reduced priced lunch and breakfast options, these programs are not enough. Nearly 10 million children are eligible for free or reduced-price school breakfasts, but do not get them.³⁴ Children who go to school hungry underperform in the classroom and often pay less attention in class, are absent more often, and have more disciplinary problems.

Responding to the startling data on hunger in America, Congress established the bipartisan **National Commission on Hunger** to provide recommendations to Congress and the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. The nine-member Commission heard from more than 180 experts and members of the public on how to end hunger in America. The following recommendations draw on some of the wisdom and expertise from that Commission and will help ensure that students are able to focus on their schoolwork rather than their next meal. For a more thorough list of policy recommendations, see the Commission's final report, *Freedom from Hunger: An Achievable Goal for the United States*.

A 2014 study found that adults who grew up in disadvantaged households were 16 percentage points less likely to be obese and 18 percentage points more likely to have graduated from high school if their families had access to Food Stamps when they were young.

1. **All schools should provide breakfast in the classroom.** School breakfast programs are provided at most public schools across the country, but barriers like transportation and stigma prevent millions of children from accessing this important meal when it is served in the cafeteria before the school day begins. Providing breakfast in the classroom ensures food insecure children start their school day with a nutritious meal and are ready to learn. Research shows that children who eat school breakfast score up to 17.5 percent higher on math tests and miss fewer days of school.³⁵
2. **Summer meal programs should include options to reach children living in underserved communities.** Today, only one in six children in need receive a meal during the summer months. The current summer meals program needs to be improved to allow for more flexibility to reach children living in rural, high poverty, suburban, and other hard to reach communities. The program should include a summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) option and non-congregate feeding options, in addition to the traditional congregate model. Evaluations have shown that summer EBT models can decrease food insecurity among children by 30 percent.³⁶
3. **Provide SNAP benefits to adequately address hunger.** Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits should more accurately reflect the cost of food across the country to ensure families have the resources to shop for and prepare healthy meals throughout the month. Currently, millions of families exhaust their benefits before the end of the month. A recent study found that the incidence of disciplinary events among students in families on food stamps was nearly 50 percent higher at the end of the month, when benefits had typically run out, than at the beginning of the month. In addition, SNAP has a proven track record of success. A 2015 study found that adults who grew up in disadvantaged households were 16

percentage points less likely to be obese and 18 percentage points more likely to have graduated from high school if their families had access to Food Stamps when they were young.³⁷

4. **Ensure that SNAP promotes and supports work.** SNAP is designed to prevent and treat hunger, but as the bipartisan National Commission on Hunger recommends, it can also support families as they enter or re-enter the job market. Congress and the United States Department of Agriculture should require states to provide more opportunities for adults participating in SNAP to acquire the skills they need and find jobs with wages sufficient to enable them to leave SNAP. Such supports should include more case management and employment services for non-working, non-disabled, non-pregnant heads of households as well as connections to such services. SNAP eligibility should also incentivize work by improving responsiveness to earned-income fluctuations. Giving states the flexibility to offer temporary extensions to households leaving SNAP for employment would ensure SNAP is structured to encourage work.
5. **Improve The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to address systemic challenges facing young children.** In addition to ensuring that no student goes through the school day hungry, it is critical to ensure that infants and very young children have the nutrition they need to thrive and be ready to succeed in school. There is extensive evidence that WIC has positive effects on infant and children's health.³⁸ To build on this effectiveness, WIC should allow children to stay in the program until age six, when most begin full day school. WIC policies should also be improved to address retention rates, specifically after age one, by addressing barriers to participation, such as negative shopping experiences and low perceived value of the WIC food package.

According to the Urban Institute report, *The Housing Affordability Gap for Extremely Low Income Renters*, not a single county in the United States can fill 100% of its low-income populations' need for safe, affordable housing.

Ensure Every Child Has a Home

During the 2013-14 school year, more than 1.3 million K-12 public school students were identified as homeless.³⁹ As high as these numbers seem, the estimates are almost certainly conservative due to the difficulty in tracking and measuring student homelessness and the stigma and fear that inhibits students from self-reporting. Homelessness is associated with a myriad of negative life outcomes. Students who experience homelessness are far less likely to graduate from high school than their peers. Currently, only five states publicly report high school graduation rates for homeless students. In all five states, homeless students had graduation rates at least 17 percentage points lower than the national average, with that gap going as high as 30 percentage points in the state of Washington.⁴⁰ In addition, homeless students are much more likely to have engaged with the juvenile justice system. Although student homelessness is growing, communities are largely unaware of the problem. To ensure that all homeless students are able to graduate from high school and are connected to organizations and services that can help them find stable housing and other supports to stay and succeed in school, we recommend:



The 2016 Project GRAD Los Angeles Scholars

1. **Working to ensure states, districts, and schools fully implement the measures regarding homeless students in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).** Last year, ESSA was signed into law reauthorizing the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to bolster services for homeless children and youth. However, enacting these laws is only the beginning. Schools and districts must be educated on the new requirements under ESSA, and we must ensure that those requirements are fully carried out and funded.
2. **Building connections to schools by expanding and scaling evidence-based school-agency and school-community organization partnerships** that identify homeless students and connect them to housing and other supports they need while safeguarding the students' privacy. Schools cannot do this work alone. Children experiencing homelessness need support from outside organizations, including evidence-based school-housing partnerships, like host home programs. Students also need connections with caring adults beyond the walls of the school who can serve as mentors and advocates. Mentoring relationships can provide an important stabilizing support to homeless youth who often do not have access to consistent adults in their lives.
3. **Improving the transition from foster care to independent living.** Youth aging out of foster care face a unique set of challenges in successfully making the transition to adult independent living. Bridge programs that can help them gain career-skills and credentials and smooth the transition to a career or post-secondary education are necessary.
4. **Increasing public awareness and rallying communities to help in the fight against student homelessness.** For far too long, homeless students in America's public schools have remained hidden in the shadows. By raising awareness, community organizations can help remove many of the barriers youth face and bring this issue to light, diminishing the stigma and fear that many students confront and creating buy-in at the community level to help this vulnerable population have the same opportunities as their peers.

Increase the High School Graduation Rate and Facilitate the Entry of Graduates into Post-secondary Education, Training, or Employment

While the nation continues to reach record high graduation rates, significant gaps remain for economically disadvantaged students, minorities, those with disabilities, English Language Learners, and homeless students compared to their peers. There are also lingering concerns about whether high school graduates are prepared for post-secondary education, given the high number of first year students requiring remedial education. In 2014, the high school graduation rate continued to climb, reaching another all-time high of 82.3 percent. Significant challenges remain, however, to reach the goal of a 90 percent graduation rate for *all* students by 2020, especially for low-income and minority students who continue to lag well behind their peers. The importance of graduating from high school cannot be overstated and

continues to increase as it becomes more difficult to find a job in today's economy without a diploma. The unemployment rate for high school dropouts is significantly higher than those graduating from high school and those who have taken at least some college classes.

In addition, the loss in lifetime earnings for those who fail to graduate high school are staggering. Those who receive a high school diploma make 33 percent, or around a half million dollars, more in lifetime earnings than their peers who fail to graduate. It is imperative to improve the pipeline from high school to college, as the lifetime earnings of workers with a bachelor's degree are \$1.2 million more than those without a high school diploma and nearly one million dollars more than those who do graduate.⁴¹ Furthermore, a high school diploma carries with it benefits beyond increased lifetime earnings. High school graduates are less likely to have poor health⁴² and engage in criminal behaviors.⁴³ They are also more likely to vote, volunteer, and participate in the lives of their communities. It is crucial that all students from diverse backgrounds are graduating on time and are college- and career-ready. To help reach the goal of a 90 percent high school graduation rate for all students by 2020, we recommend:



Photo courtesy of: Reach Out and Read

1. Ensuring that every student is reading proficient by the third grade.

Research has found that children who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers.⁴⁴ Moreover, data tells us that reading aloud to young children is not only one of the best activities to stimulate language and cognitive skills but also builds motivation, curiosity, and memory.⁴⁵ Investments should be made in evidence-based programs like Reach Out and Read—a population-level early literacy program that incorporates books into pediatric care and encourages families to read aloud together with their infants, toddlers, and preschoolers to help ensure a solid foundation of reading and learning in the earliest years of life. Reading Recovery—a short-term early intervention for first-graders having trouble with reading—has a proven track record of success and should be scaled to ensure no students are falling behind.

2. Recruiting, training, and supporting teachers. High-quality teachers are the single most important factor within schools to boost the achievement of students. Reforms need to be instituted to recruit, train, and support such teachers and to foster learning communities to share best practices. National service organizations like **City Year**, **Citizen Schools** and **Jumpstart** are a source of diverse talent that has experience working in high need schools. Teacher residencies and prep programs such as **Urban Teacher Center** and **Relay Graduate School of Education** represent opportunities to increase the number of high quality teachers with supportive training experiences.

3. Improving and expanding school-based Early Warning Systems and tying them to evidence-based interventions for at-risk students.

Researchers have found clear indicators and benchmarks in attendance, behavior and course performance—or the ABCs—that point to a student being at risk of dropping out. Early Warning Systems must be tied to tiered intervention approaches so that when red flags are raised, at risk students

Student participation in programs like **Citizen Schools**, an evidence-based expanded learning program that provides academic support and hands-on learning opportunities for middle school students, lead to immediate gains in core academic skills and self-confidence, which translates into increased success in high school.



Photo courtesy of: City Year Tulsa

can be immediately connected to the assistance they need in order to get back on track such as assigning students who are at risk of dropping out with a school-connected mentor who would meet with the student and create an educational plan. One example of an integrated system of support is the **Diplomas Now** collaboration between **Talent Development Secondary**, **City Year**, and **Communities In Schools**.

Neuroscience research demonstrates that crucial brain development occurs during adolescence, making middle school a critical time to engage students and set them on a path to a successful transition to high school and beyond. Therefore, access to high-quality academic and enrichment programming for middle school students should be an important focus within communities and among policy makers. Studies show that attendance, grades, test scores, and behavior during the secondary grades predict a student's likelihood of graduating. Student participation in programs like **Citizen Schools**, an evidence-based expanded learning program that provides academic support and hands-on learning opportunities for middle school students, lead to immediate gains in core academic skills and self-confidence, which translates into increased success in high school.

Students' developmental needs change as they progress through elementary and high school, and there needs to be a continuum of direct student supports at every grade level to counteract the impact of poverty on student learning. In communities across the country, national service programs are partnering with school districts and schools to provide the additional manpower needed to meet complex student needs and to enhance school improvement efforts across students' education experience from elementary to high school. Early Warning and Longitudinal Data Systems will enable such supports to be provided more effectively in a continuum of care to cohorts of students over time. For example, Deloitte partnered with City Year, in partnership with local leaders in each of the communities where City Year serves, to conduct rigorous analysis of the matriculation patterns of students.

4. **Expanding and integrating social and emotional learning with academic development.** Research shows that students who receive high quality social and emotional learning have achievement scores an average of 11 percentage points higher than students who do not. They also have improved attitudes about self, others and school, positive classroom behavior and a decline in conduct problems and emotional distress. High-quality social and emotional learning should be expanded in schools, districts and states to boost academic achievement, reduce bullying and violence, promote empathy, and foster the very skills employers are looking for in their workforce.
5. **Reforming low-performing high schools.** Over the last decade, evidence-based efforts to reform or close low-performing high schools have resulted in a 50 percent decline in the number of "dropout factories." These efforts should continue, including identifying and reforming the approximately

800 remaining dropout factory high schools where 50 percent of African American and Hispanic students—whose graduation rates trail their peers—are found. Provide competitive grants to districts and nonprofit organizations (as well as a partnership of these groups) for programs serving individuals beginning in middle school and continuing through age 24, that are designed to increase the high school graduation rate in high-poverty high schools; enable students who have left school to return to high school and obtain their diploma; and facilitate the entry of graduates of those high schools into institutions of higher education.



Photo courtesy of: Jobs for the Future

6. **Supporting multiple pathways to success** by focusing on a comprehensive package of services, including pathways that offer students flexible schedules (such as evening classes, year-round programs, and open enrollment); pathways that reduce “seat time barriers” by allowing students to graduate without having spent a specific period of time in a classroom; and programs outside the regular school settings that offer experiential service-learning opportunities.
7. **Improving the high school to post-secondary to work pipeline**, by expanding such programs as Career Academies that provide students in high school with employment related skills, connections to the workforce, dual enrollment programs, and Early College High School.
8. **Providing critical post-secondary transitional skills preparation for students moving into the 21st century global workforce.** The transition between high school and adulthood is critical to success and students must be equipped with knowledge, skills, hands-on experience, and connections with adults in the workplace. The key areas of preparation that should be undertaken by schools are: 1) fostering community engagement in schools, 2) utilizing the “Local Community as a Classroom” model, 3) teaching entrepreneurship, 4) teaching career and life skills and 5) creating professional networks for students. By developing programming, school partnerships with local businesses, and experiential learning in each of these areas, students will transition into their post-secondary experiences with the skills and support necessary to embark on their pathways for success and prosperity in careers and adulthood.
9. **Increasing the use of post-secondary success strategies to ensure enrollment, persistence, and success.** A number of Opportunity Nation Coalition members are youth development organizations (**YouthBuild USA, The Corps Network, Year Up and Jobs for the Future.**) They have developed an effective model for reconnecting Opportunity Youth and first-generation students to post-secondary education and training with high levels of persistence through the difficult first year of enrollment. These strategies involve engaging youth in a career and college-going culture tied to comprehensive development programming that supports service and work experiences, case management, and counseling and/or mentoring. This includes high-quality, college-ready secondary level instruction with academic supports, college and career planning, bridging support and first-year college persistence and success support.

“My children are the highlight of my life and I love them dearly. I am currently a full time employee for the St. Clair County Housing Authority. The skills I learned in Emerson Park’s YouthBuild program have helped me a great deal. I will never forget the experience, nor the journey I took to get where I am right now today. The program changed my life. I don’t know where I would be today, maybe dead or in jail. I thank God every day for sparing my life that day and I thank Him for the people he has involved in my life.”

— Joesean Williams
YouthBuild graduate,
East St. Louis, Illinois

Reconnect One Million Opportunity Youth Each Year to Education, Employment, Service, and Leadership

Opportunity Youth who remain disconnected from school and work will be unable to take advantage of opportunities in the job market of the future and are more likely to become economic burdens, rather than assets, to their country. A recent survey has shown that one unemployed youth costs federal and state governments more than \$4,100 per year in lost tax revenue and benefits received.⁴⁶ In 2011, youth disconnection cost taxpayers \$93.7 billion in government support and lost taxpayer revenue. In addition, a 2012 study estimated that the lifetime economic burden of one cohort of Opportunity Youth is \$1.6 trillion to the taxpayer and \$4.7 trillion to society.⁴⁷ This estimate of “social burden” includes lost earnings, health expenses, crime costs, and welfare and social services. The savings to society of reconnecting one million young people each year would be immense.

As young people need opportunities to reconnect with education and employment, there is a need among employers to find qualified workers for a variety of middle skill and service jobs. There are 5.5 million unfilled jobs in America, however, Opportunity Youth who have been out of school and out of work need preparation for these jobs. Although Congress put aside partisan differences and passed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) with a new focus on training disconnected youth, we must be vigilant and encourage the bipartisan spirit and focus on youth to continue through the implementation process. This preparation for employment can be provided by a variety of education, job training and service opportunities.

To reach the goal of reengaging one million Opportunity Youth by 2025, we recommend:

1. **Supporting evidence-based, comprehensive reengagement programming.** Comprehensive federally authorized education and employment programs, such as YouthBuild, Job Corps, and the National Guard Youth ChalleNge program, provide Opportunity Youth with full-time education and training programs for at least six months and up to two years—a level of intensity that has shown to be critical for the most disconnected young people. In some cases, they include personal counseling, community service, leadership development, stipends for work performed, important service to their community, and long-term follow-up supports. Job Corps and ChalleNge are residential programs, and YouthBuild is a community-based full-time non-residential program with an emphasis on local community service and leadership.
2. **Supporting effective short-term reconnection programs.** Adult Basic Education, WIOA Formula funds, and Chafee Education and Training Vouchers serve large numbers of Opportunity Youth. Those young people who do not need comprehensive long-term programs, but who do need short-term or part-time assistance to get their High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED), or to connect with jobs or housing, should find them easily available.

3. *Continuing to innovate and develop the evidence base of what works, especially for the most disconnected young people, including court-involved youth.* A key mechanism for doing this is through innovation awards such as the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) which combines federal funding with a three-to-one match of new private investment. For example, current SIF initiatives with a focus on education and employment for Opportunity Youth include: **Opportunity Works**, a partnership of **Jobs for the Future** and the **Aspen Forum for Community Solutions**; the **Casey Family Program's LEAP initiative**; and **New Profit Pathways Fund**. Such innovation awards are critical in piloting and evaluating new methods, as well as scaling evidence-based innovations and models, and further proving their worth. By continuing to invest in programs like **REDF** through innovation awards and public-private-nonprofit partnerships, social enterprises can scale their impact and continue to identify data-driven solutions to the challenges facing Opportunity Youth today.
4. *To achieve scale, show employers that hiring Opportunity Youth is good for the bottom line.* If job training programs for Opportunity Youth are viewed as charitable initiatives, they will not grow to the scale needed to provide jobs to all youth who want and need them. Encourage employers to track data, comparable to how **Gap Inc.** has demonstrated the business value of its paid internship program, This Way Ahead,⁴⁸ and support research efforts like those being led by Year Up and **Grads of Life**.

Update Career and Technical Education & Incentivize Employers to Hire and Train Youth

As low-skill labor disappears and the job market demands more from its workers, it is essential to train the youth of America for work in emerging, high-demand, and high-skill fields. Currently, the skilled trades are the hardest jobs to fill in the United States, with recent data citing 806,000 jobs open in the trade, transportation and utilities sector and 293,000 jobs open in manufacturing.⁴⁹ Career and technical education (CTE) and apprenticeships are powerful tools to prepare the students of today for the workforce of tomorrow.

Both CTE and apprenticeships have proven benefits for students, adults, businesses, and the economy. A person with a CTE-related associate's degree or credential will earn between \$4,000 and \$19,000 more a year on average than a person with a humanities degree.⁵⁰ Similarly, those who engage in apprenticeships on average see gains in lifetime income of more than \$300,000 compared to their peers.⁵¹ We recommend:

1. *Reauthorizing and improving the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act.* The Act has been up for reauthorization since the 2006 authorization period ended in 2013. The Carl D. Perkins Act should increase alignment, collaboration and coordination; target programming to those most in need; and include innovative strategies and activities to help ensure more students enter the workforce with the skills they need to compete for 21st century jobs. The law should also prioritize engaging community-based organizations in providing high-quality hands-on and service-learning experiences to supplement classroom instruction.



Grads of Life

The Grads of Life campaign seeks to change perceptions employers have of young people with atypical resumes. The Grads of Life website offers the tools to connect leading employers to employment pathways, including mentoring, school-to-work, internships, and hiring.



Connecting Youth and Strengthening Communities, a research report issued by Opportunity Nation, showed that the likelihood that a young person is disconnected from school or work drops nearly in half if he or she volunteers.

2. ***Consolidating duplicative job-training programs and shifting funding streams to the most effective programs.*** In response to concerns around current job training programs, including a 2011 General Accountability Office study which found that nine federal agencies spent approximately \$18 billion to administer 47 programs, WIOA was passed by a bipartisan Congress and signed into law.⁵² Efforts under WIOA to reform programs, including those found to be duplicative, should be carefully monitored to assess effects, without taking away services to those receiving them, so that more federal dollars are available for the most effective programs.
3. ***Incentivizing employers to hire and train youth.*** These policies can include providing employers with tax credits for each apprentice they hire and higher tax credits to the employer if the apprentice is an Opportunity Youth. This would help to account for the additional training costs, such as a pre-apprenticeship program, since apprenticeships can sometimes be difficult to secure without appropriate course work or some training. Federal and state governments should also look into creating new competitive grants to support public-private apprentice partnerships and partnerships between community colleges, employers, and community-based organizations.
4. ***Increasing the civic engagement of youth.*** According to the Opportunity Index, volunteering has decreased four percent since 2011. The percentage of young people working to advance the American Dream through systems and policy change is even lower: a USA Today/Bipartisan Policy Center poll reports that while 45 percent of Americans are likely to volunteer at a school, only 19 percent would write a letter for a political opinion and only 14 percent would attend a political meeting. Studies from the **Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE)** suggest that policy-based civic engagement also enhances academic progress and high school completion. Data from the Department of Education shows that disadvantaged youth are least likely to have service-learning opportunities. In 2011, Congress defunded the Learn and Serve America program, aimed at engaging youth in service-learning through schools and community organizations. This program should be restored. K-12 education must be a pipeline for American history and civic education and engagement, with action-based civic learning in schools growing from 20 percent currently to at least 80 percent within a decade. Fostering habits of citizenship is critical to a functioning democracy that can provide equality of opportunity.
5. ***Engaging the business community to bring apprenticeships and mentoring/career exploration programs into schools.*** Mentorship is a powerful way to bring volunteer experts into high-need schools where they are supported by trained staff, as they share what they know and love with students, and can help meet 21st century workforce challenges such as the STEM pipeline issue. Private sector businesses are uniquely positioned to make an impact through mentoring in the communities where they are located. They not only have financial resources, but also a pool of caring adults who can model positive attitudes, intellectual curiosity, compassion for others, and the determination to succeed—characteristics young people need in order to achieve success. Through public-private partnerships, community organizations like **Citizen Schools** or **US2020** bring thousands of volunteer professionals into schools to provide high-quality mentorship

experiences and career exploration to students across the country.

These partnerships should be focused on high-demand fields to increase employability for participants. Partnerships should also develop industry-specific training so that students can be prepared for employment when they finish the program.

We also note the tremendous energy in the private sector to engage and employ Opportunity Youth. Launched in August 2015, the **100,000 Opportunities Initiative** is the largest employer-led coalition focused on creating career pathways for Opportunity Youth. The coalition's goal is to train and hire 100,000 Opportunity Youth by 2018. They are well on their way to exceeding this goal. Through apprenticeships, internships, and jobs, Opportunity Youth are connected to employment while earning valuable skills and credentials. The 100,000 Opportunities Initiative is administered by **FSG** and **The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions** and is comprised of companies dedicated to transforming their practices in order to tap into the talent of Opportunity Youth. Leading funders and supporters include **Starbucks**, **The Rockefeller Foundation**, and **Walmart**.⁵³

Improve Affordability, Quality, and Financial Aid Access in Post-secondary Education

As employers continue to look for more skilled workers, it has become increasingly difficult to find work without some form of post-secondary education. Expanding career and technical education through apprenticeships and other similar programs will help, but it is also essential to make it easier and more affordable for all students to obtain post-secondary certificates and diplomas regardless of their economic circumstances. Furthermore, as the demand for higher skilled labor increases, America is projected to face a shortfall of five million workers with post-secondary degrees by 2020. The following proposals will help to increase college access and completion:

1. **Expanding the available information on college performance so that parents and youth can make more informed decisions in their college choice.** Institutions of higher education should be required to disseminate additional data in an easy to understand format so that prospective students and families have all the information needed to make the right decision, including the average amount of federal loan debts students incur upon leaving the institution. There is also bipartisan legislation (The Student Right to Know Before You Go Act), which links wage records with transcript records to determine the success post-secondary institutions have in training students for the workforce. This data is essential to inform students and families about their educational options as well as to inform policymakers of how the billions of dollars invested in our higher education system are serving to expand higher education opportunity.



Photo courtesy of: YouthBuild



Photo courtesy of: Jobs for the Future

2. ***Simplifying the application process for student aid.*** There are numerous federal student loan packages, each with different rules and eligibility requirements, making the different options available for students highly confusing. The current Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) has over 108 questions. What's more, there are currently nine separate repayment programs, all with different eligibility requirements, repayment schedules, and terms and conditions. At a time when we need to make college more affordable and the pathway to higher education more accessible, confusing student aid packages and repayment plans do directly the opposite.
3. ***Modernizing funding streams like Pell Grants to address the needs of today's college student.*** Currently, if a student enrolls full-time in college for two consecutive semesters, they exhaust their Pell eligibility for the academic year. This precludes students from being able to take additional credits in summer and winter sessions. Congress should reinstate year-round Pell grants, an idea which has bipartisan support, to support students who are seeking to complete their college program faster than the traditional college student.
4. ***Encouraging college savings plans for low-income children.*** Many low-income families lack the resources to save for the future. **Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED)** is leading the charge to demonstrate the importance of savings for achieving success. 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 and four times more likely to graduate than their peers who lack such savings accounts for post-secondary training and education programs.⁵⁴
5. ***Supporting pathways to success.*** Post-secondary institutions can take important steps to improve the successful completion of credentials and degrees, including improving credit transfer from other institutions, creating pathways that continue the attainment of credentials and degrees after one or two years of post-secondary education, improving Federal Work Study, enabling more flexible scheduling around coursework to account for students who work while they are enrolled, and providing greater data transparency across courses of study as they relate to employment. Efforts should also be undertaken to foster career knowledge and skills in post-secondary institutions, including networking, access to internships and apprenticeships, the development of entrepreneurial skills, and understanding and successfully entering the labor market. Employers and institutions of higher education must work together with the federal government to create innovative credentialing and certification programs that reward the development of in-demand skills, no matter where today's students learn. By promoting competency and refocusing on outcomes, we can improve college access and success rates and our nation's economy.
6. ***Increasing access to on-campus early-childhood education options for student parents.*** According to the **Institute for Women's Policy Research**, 26 percent of all undergraduate students—or 4.8 million students—are raising dependent children.⁵⁵ At the same time, availability of on-campus child care for student parents remains inadequate. Just half of our nation's public four-year institutions provide on-campus child care services and only 45 percent of community colleges—where the largest

share of student parents are enrolled—report having on-campus child care.⁵⁶ Currently, the Child Care Access Means Parents In Schools (CCAMPIS) program provides grants to schools to expand or establish on-campus childcare. CCAMPIS has enjoyed bipartisan support since its inception in 1998 and can be updated to meet the needs of today's students.

- 7. *Reforming the Federal Work-Study Program*** The Federal Work-Study Program reaches more than 700,000 students annually and is an essential piece of the federal financial aid system. However, in an era where marketable skills and career pathways are more valuable than ever, more than 80 percent of participants work on campus. Additionally, work study allocations are given out to schools via metrics that reward longevity and the cost of attendance, not student need or performance. Congress should evaluate ways within the Federal Work Study program to reward schools that are serving the students most in need and develop more diverse, off-campus opportunities.

Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit

While the national unemployment rate has returned to five percent during the recovery from the Great Recession, American wages have remained stagnant. In fact, since the 1970s, wages have actually declined, even as productivity has skyrocketed. It is time to give American workers a raise and help let the tax code benefit low-income workers who have managed to find work.

We propose doubling the maximum credit, phase-in, and phase-out rates for childless adults, and lowering the eligibility age from 25 to 21.

In today's world of divided politics, it is exceptionally rare to find a program that receives as much bipartisan support as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Recently, Senator Patty Murray, Speaker Paul Ryan and President Barack Obama have voiced their support for expansion of the EITC. AEI and The Brookings Institution and other organizations have expressed their support for expanding the EITC.

In 2013, the EITC protected nearly 6.2 million Americans from poverty and mitigated economic hardship for an additional 21.6 million people.⁵⁷ Childless workers, however, remain the only low-income workers whose incomes are substantially reduced by federal income taxes.⁵⁸ CFED is drawing attention to the important role EITC plays in reducing poverty.

Advance Juvenile and Criminal Justice Reform

State and federal prison expenditures have risen at devastating rates since the 1980s. From 1986 to 2012, total state spending on corrections increased by 427 percent,⁵⁹ while federal spending increased seven-fold.⁶⁰

There is growing momentum both at the federal and state levels to pass common sense criminal justice reforms. In previous sessions of Congress, bills like The Smarter Sentencing Act, Public Safety Enhancement Act, and the Recidivism Reduction and Public Safety Act have received bipartisan and bicameral support before eventually stalling in committee. Currently, both houses of Congress are working to pass bipartisan criminal justice reforms.



Photo courtesy of: The Corps Network

"I am learning the pathway out of poverty includes enriching your mind, embracing opportunities, and allowing positive role models to walk alongside you on the journey of life."

Timothy Gunn,
2016 Corpsmember of the Year,
The Corps Network

Upon his release from prison, Tim contacted and enrolled in The Sustainability Institute. Now in his third AmeriCorps term of service, Tim is an Assistant Site Supervisor and leads Corpsmembers in home-energy retrofitting projects.

Tim was identified early in his service as having the potential to be a great leader. He mentors new Corpsmembers as they enter service and he mentors youth within the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice.

Many states have already made progress. As a recent report by the **Vera Institute of Justice** explains, in 2014 and 2015, nearly every state adopted at least one measure to reduce the prison population in order to steer individuals away from prison through efforts such as substance-abuse treatment programs and improving re-entry efforts for those leaving prison. Because more than nine in 10 inmates are housed in state facilities, state reforms are necessary to reach the vast majority of people in the justice system. We recommend the following:

1. ***Ending War-on-Drugs-era mandatory minimums for offenders.*** Evidence-based alternatives such as drug courts for offenders should be expanded.
2. ***Preparing inmates for release by expanding and supporting successful rehabilitative and re-entry programs to reduce recidivism.*** Inmates should be able to use progress in rehabilitative programs to earn time off their prison stay and prepare them for re-entry into public life. In 2011, 688,384 men and women—approximately 1,885 individuals a day—were released from state or federal custody.⁶¹ In order to ensure a successful transition into society and into education or the workforce, transitional programs or re-entry programs can be an important bridge for returning citizens. The Second Chance Pell Grant pilot program is a good example of an innovative idea that prepares current inmates for future life success and should be rigorously tested and scaled if proven effective. Programs like YouthBuild and **The Corps Network's Civic Justice Corps** and **PowerCorpsPHL** have shown promising recidivism rates in using national service and comprehensive youth development models to help youth and young adults transition back to the community while learning new skills, gaining credentials, giving them a stake in the community, and having the community see value in them.
3. ***Partnering with, and bringing to scale, promising reforms at the state and local levels.*** Promising state-level reforms include granting judges more power to release defendants who cannot afford bail and creating 24-hour crisis centers to help keep individuals with mental health issues out of prison.⁶² We can leverage federal grants to encourage and incentivize community partnerships between local police departments and community residents. By prioritizing grant applications that propose effective collaborations, we can use data to identify the needs of young people and map existing community resources to develop a targeted plan with evidence-based approaches. The next administration can promote proactive engagement opportunities that can begin to relieve growing tensions at the community level as well as reduce youth involvement in the criminal justice system.
4. ***Creating fair chance hiring and housing policies that prohibit discrimination.*** More than 100 cities and counties and 24 states have such policies and are innovating to ensure former inmates have opportunities to reintegrate into communities and find employment.
5. ***Removing youth from the adult criminal justice system.*** There are far-reaching consequences to incarcerating youth in the adult criminal justice system. The adult criminal justice system makes no allowances for the limited

experience and understanding of developing young minds. Research shows that youth can benefit from the rehabilitative nature of the juvenile justice system. Youth in adult prisons are at risk of abuse, sexual assault, and suicide.

Promote Socioeconomic Integration and Desegregation

In 1968, just one week after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., President Johnson signed into law the Fair Housing Act of 1968. The Act was intended to protect buyers and renters from seller or landlord discrimination.

While President Johnson sought to end racial housing segregation through the Fair Housing Act, differing forms of de facto segregation have still taken root in the decades that followed.

A 2012 study by Pew Research Center, *The Rise of Residential Segregation by Income*, found that residential segregation by income has increased during the past three decades across the United States, including in 27 of the nation's 30 largest metropolitan areas. In 2010, the average low-income household resided in a tract composed of 41 percent lower-income households and 14 percent upper-income households. Conversely, the average upper-income household resided in a tract composed of 22 percent lower-income households and 32 percent upper-income households.

Robert Putnam cites “residential sorting” as one of the most significant indicators of whether a child and family will remain in poverty. Far too many communities have become segregated by a family's income or socioeconomic standing. To counteract this troublesome trend, the federal government should:

1. **Increase investments in the housing voucher program to help low-income families afford housing in neighborhoods that offer promising job opportunities and good schools for their children.** This increase should be coupled with a law that prohibits landlords from rejecting tenants because they use Section 8 housing vouchers.
2. **Preserve and develop affordable housing in high-demand real estate markets** through promising practices such as community land trusts and mandatory inclusionary zoning, which require a given share of new construction to be affordable to people with low to moderate incomes.



Photo courtesy of: Jobs for the Future

Strengthen Civic Engagement Through Action-Based Civic Education

Currently, there are more than 5.5 million 16-24 year olds disconnected from school and work. At the same time, trust in one another, institutions, and government has plummeted to the lowest levels in generations for Americans across all age groups. There is a lack of knowledge among youth about how the systems that affect them work and how to create change. Civic participation among young people trails that of other generations⁶⁴ with voting rates at historical lows, particularly among



Photo courtesy of: Service Year Alliance

minority and low-income populations who in turn are not represented by individuals and organizations in power. Action-based civic education teaches our young people about political systems and processes, and how to critically problem-solve to address the pressing issues our society faces.

One way to reconnect youth to education and civic engagement is through classroom action-based American history and civic education programs. Action-based civics education in schools has the unique power to build critical 21st century skills in young people while empowering them to proactively help address the social problems that characterize the opportunity gap.

Research has shown that action-based civics education increases student success, 21st century skills, knowledge of civic institutions, and a young person's motivation and efficacy in the political process.^{65 66} Yet few of our young people have access to the type of education where they are given the opportunity for project-based community problem-solving. Low-income youth are less likely than their higher-income peers to receive an effective action-based civics education.⁶⁷ Increased civic engagement also has a proven track record of reducing youth disconnection and helping citizens gain valuable skills and experience to embark on meaningful careers.

Specifically, this plan recommends:

1. **Boosting American history education and action-based civic learning in schools.** States should require a minimum of one semester of action-based civics learning in all middle and high schools for every student. Curricula should include promoting student voice, deliberate discussion, and real-world interactions with local leaders, officials, and systems. Promising practices have emerged from organizations such as **Generation Citizen**, **iCivic**, and **Mikva Challenge**. States and districts should scale and fund similar organizations and services that promote action-based civic learning in their schools. Funding should be appropriated on the state and district levels to ensure that teachers are trained in effective action-based civics education and have sufficient resources to bring it to their classrooms.
2. **Increasing volunteering and civic engagement in communities.** Currently, about 26 percent of the adult population regularly volunteers and the leading indicators of civic health have declined significantly over the last 40 years. States, communities, and nonprofit organizations should be encouraged to create service year positions to solve locally identified problems by partnering with the Service Year Exchange. Many communities and states are tracking their progress over time in boosting civic health, as measured by the **National Conference on Citizenship's** Civic Health Index. **The Points of Light Institute** has played a critical role in mobilizing key sectors to boost, reward, and honor volunteer service in America.

Strengthen Opportunity Through Service

Increasing service year programs can advance opportunity in three ways. First, service year programs can provide cost-effective human capital to scale proven strategies that address the root causes of poverty. Evidence-based service year programs are increasing reading scores, reducing the dropout rate, increasing college access, helping people find the services they need, rebuilding blighted neighborhoods, and restoring communities hard-hit by disasters. Full-time corps members in **VISTA**, **Habitat for Humanity**, **LIFT**, and other programs are recruiting volunteers and leveraging millions of hours of service in low-income communities. They also connect individuals with diverse backgrounds in common purpose, increasing the social capital that breaks down divides, increasing understanding, and building networks for low-income Americans that help them navigate education pathways, find jobs, and strengthen leadership skills. Today, too many young people attend schools segregated not by law but by economics and housing. Segregation persists into adulthood. A sizeable minority of Americans prefer to live in communities where people share their political views. Even the military, which was once hailed as the place where Americans of all backgrounds stood together, engages less than one percent of the population.

We can do better. Imagine what a different country we might have if every emerging adult had the formative experience of a year of service and building skills while getting to know people from different backgrounds. Research on both **AmeriCorps** and the **Peace Corps** shows that these service year experiences are linked to increased appreciation for other cultures and comfort interacting with diverse people. Finally, research has shown that service year programs can reconnect Opportunity Youth to education or employment while simultaneously rebuilding civic engagement. Americans without a high school diploma that participate in national service programs are 51 percent more likely to find employment on average. They do this by giving youth the chance to: 1) explore and build career experiences; 2) set goals, identify the education, training, and experience necessary to achieve them, and use this knowledge to make decisions about education and activities; 3) receive support from mentors and build professional relationships with individuals who can help them find jobs; and 4) develop 21st century skills that increase employment potential including self-efficacy, respect for diversity, self-confidence, collaboration, avoidance of risk behaviors, resilience, social responsibility, communication, and leadership.

Experts look to service years as an important strategy to change the equation for Opportunity Youth. For example, the **Institute of Medicine and National Research Council** examined research to inform policy relating to adults aged 18 - 26, in *Investing in the Health and Well-Being of Young Adults*. Among its findings, the panel found that national service, including military service, can contribute to optimal development during the transition to adulthood by providing new and alternative opportunities to contribute to society in meaningful ways, to form one's identity, and to explore the larger world. For

Evidence-based service year programs are increasing reading scores, reducing the dropout rate, increasing college access, helping people find the services they need, rebuilding blighted neighborhoods, and restoring communities hard-hit by disasters.



Photo courtesy of: Service Year Alliance



Photo courtesy of: Service Year Alliance

some, national service is a logical next step after college; for those who do not enter college, it can be a path to social incorporation and to skill and network building. If national service is to serve this function for marginalized young adults, however, it must provide at least some of the scaffolds (mentoring, counseling, education and training, guided practice in leadership and teamwork) that are built into curricular and co-curricular college life.

To put America on a path to one million service year opportunities, policymakers should:

1. **Restore national service as a national priority**, starting by dramatically increasing the number of full-time service positions through the three successful federal civilian national service programs—**AmeriCorps**, **Peace Corps**, and **YouthBuild**—and asking every federal agency to create a service year corps to tackle important challenges cost-effectively. Congress and the administration should fulfill the promise of the bipartisan Serve America Act by fully funding the 250,000 AmeriCorps, VISTA and National Civilian Community Corps positions, while using existing and new resources to create or expand agency corps to meet public needs at lower costs to taxpayers, as the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps, School Turnaround, AmeriCorps, and FEMA Corps are doing now. The 21st Century Conservation Service Corps, with its goal to engage 100,000 youth and veterans in national service, should be authorized and supported. In addition, the next Administration should keep in the top tier for competition the criterion that disadvantaged populations are included as service givers, not just service receivers.
2. **Establish service year opportunities as a pathway to higher education and careers** by increasing education awards and loan forgiveness for those who serve, making those education awards tax-free, creating incentives for higher education institutions to recognize and reward service years, and recruiting service year alumni into federal jobs.
3. **Encourage states, communities, and nonprofits to create service year positions** to solve locally identified problems by partnering with the Service Year Exchange, a new private sector technology platform designed to connect individuals who want to serve with certified publicly and privately funded service year positions.

Conclusion

America's greatness rests on an inalienable principle that all of us deserve the opportunity to achieve the American Dream. For nearly two and a half centuries, that ever-expanding dream has made us a better and stronger nation. Today we pledge to put party affiliation aside to save and invest in The Nation We Make.

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