



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

McCourt School of Public Policy
Center on Education and the Workforce

Press Contact

Emma Wenzinger
ew42@georgetown.edu

It's Time for an All-One-System Approach to Youth Policy, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce Says

The paradigm shift to support youth from early childhood through early career is underway in Congress

(Washington, DC, October 19, 2021) The United States needs a new all-one-system approach that supports youth on their journey through education and training and into careers, according to a new publication from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW). *If Not Now, When? The Urgent Need for an All-One-System Approach to Youth Policy* suggests major changes in programs for youth from early childhood through early career.

The nation has long had a disjointed approach to youth policy, with pre-K–12, postsecondary education, and the workforce operating in silos that allowed many young people to fall through the cracks. The Build Back Better Act would begin to reshape youth policy in ways that align with CEW's recommendations for repairing the fragmented system that continues to fail America's young people.

The time is right to introduce an all-one-system approach to the country's youth policy. The pandemic has highlighted young people's vulnerabilities and youth policy's inadequacies in addressing them. The impediments facing young people on the journey from youth to adulthood have reached new heights in a perfect storm of longstanding economic pressures and current challenges.

The evidence of our failure to help all youth successfully transition to adult economic independence is plain. In the journey from kindergarten to a good job, the most talented disadvantaged youth do not fare nearly as well as the least talented advantaged youth. Children from families in the top quartile by family socioeconomic status (SES) who have low test scores have a 71% chance of being in the top half by SES in their late 20s. However, children from families from the bottom SES quartile but with top test scores have only a 31% chance of being in the top half by SES in their late 20s. The current education-to-work pipeline is fraught with class and race inequalities.

"We haven't connected the dots from early childhood, through K–12 and postsecondary education, to careers," said Anthony P. Carnevale, lead author and CEW director. "We need an all-one-system approach that facilitates smooth transitions on the pathway from youth dependence to adult independence."

An all-one-system approach would connect each segment of the transition from early childhood to early career, with data-informed guidance and wraparound support services along the way. This approach would start with high-quality, equitably funded, universal preschool, as well as support for families with young children. From kindergarten through college, it would provide students with opportunities for career exploration. It would involve inclusive and culturally responsive practices to improve the experiences of youth from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds.

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An all-one-system approach would break down the artificial barriers between secondary schools, postsecondary institutions, and labor markets through programs such as dual enrollment and improved transfer policies from community colleges to four-year institutions. A more robust career counseling system would give students the information and guidance they need to plan and pursue their educational and career goals. Free-college options would help low-income students access postsecondary education, and strong wraparound support services and transfer pathways would aid traditionally underrepresented students in attaining their bachelor's degrees. Greater transparency and accountability of postsecondary education and training programs would help educators and counselors better advise students. Finally, collaboration among educators and employers would support the development of work-based learning opportunities.

Despite almost 50 years of reforms, there has been relatively little progress in making high school students college- and career-ready. Youth policy has been hampered by fragmentation and insufficient federal investment to meet the evolving needs of young people.

The majority of young people used to attain good jobs by their mid-20s. Today, there is a new phase on the path to adulthood that combines postsecondary education, training, and early work experience. It now takes many young people until their 30s to latch onto a good job and career.

At the same time, the costs of college have skyrocketed, creating a barrier for many young people seeking a degree or credential, while the collapse of the youth labor market has made it difficult for young people to gain high-quality work experience. The share of youth ages 16 to 21 who are employed declined from 59% in 1980 to 44% in 2019, while those enrolled in school or college increased from 57% to 71% over the same period.

Other Key Findings:

- Young people have been hit particularly hard in the three recessions since the turn of the millennium, and the share of youth ages 16 to 21 who are working is now 14 percentage points less than it was in 2000.
- The median earnings of young adults with a bachelor's degree or higher have been growing, while those of young adults with less education have been declining.
- While the share of jobs that require postsecondary education and training increased by 32 percentage points between 1983 and 2017, the share of the federal budget spent on education and training increased by only 1.2 percentage points.

To view the publication, visit cew.georgetown.edu/allonesystem.

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