



Presented by:



Business Collaborative for Education Equity

TOGETHER WE THRIVE

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Building Tomorrow's Workforce: Equitable Education and Career Pathways for Opportunity Youth in Fairfield County

Executive Summary

In August 2020, a group of Fairfield County businesses came together to form the **Fairfield County Business Collaborative for Education Equity (BCEE)** — a bold effort to create new opportunities for the county's most vulnerable pre-K through 12+ students. The group formed at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was causing significant disruptions for students — particularly students of color and students from families with low incomes. BCEE companies contribute financially, provide mentorship and internship opportunities to students, and encourage their employees to volunteer for the effort.

Founding members established the BCEE in partnership with Fairfield County's Community Foundation (FCCF), with a correlating field of interest fund housed at FCCF to support the Collaborative's work. FCCF provides the BCEE with both strategic and day-to-day project management support to advance educational equity in Greater Bridgeport, Danbury, Norwalk, and Stamford. While the partnership initially focused on addressing the urgent needs of students and their families during the pandemic, it quickly evolved into a longer-term, multi-year effort that supports students, their parents and guardians, teachers, and staff.

As part of the BCEE's last grant cycle, the Collaborative invited nonprofits to tell the funder group how it could support their work beyond grants. Several related themes rose to the top from Norwalk nonprofits, particularly those focused on the older age range of preK-12th students, looking to share their experiences serving Opportunity Youth (OY) — young adults aged 14-24 without a high school or postsecondary degree — and working together with cross-sector stakeholders to strengthen student career path opportunities. Acting on this feedback, BCEE commissioned a study to understand how to create better conditions for students to pursue postsecondary education and/or employment. To dig deeper into the issue, the study included insights and data from Norwalk nonprofits with programs related to youth education and/or workforce development.

As a result of a combination of economic, health, housing, and educational inequities — many students in Fairfield County face barriers to preparing themselves for meaningful careers when they become adults, which has contributed to **a significant gap in livable-wage**

employment in Norwalk and Fairfield County generally.

Nearly half of Norwalk's workforce — 48% — is employed in jobs earning below \$42,000 a year, the minimum livable salary for the area, according to the ALICE threshold. Opportunity Youth (OY) are disproportionately likely to fall into this category. (An estimated 40,000 OY live in Connecticut.) Black and Latino students — who are less likely to earn high school diplomas and attend college than their white counterparts — are also significantly more likely to fall below the ALICE threshold.

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Many local organizations are actively working to tackle these challenges, but as our research highlights, truly moving the needle on building tomorrow's local workforce — and generating a more prosperous local economy — is not the work of one sector or a few organizations working independently. And while robust resources and programs that align with many stages in OY's career journeys already exist across Norwalk, Fairfield County, and Connecticut, **a more integrated and holistic approach, reinforced by stronger cross-sector partner relationships where stakeholder perspectives are equally valued, is needed to ensure that interventions are optimally coordinated and working toward a common goal.**

As many regional stakeholders know, the data crystallizes the need for an improved approach. Three in 10 Fairfield County employers report they are unable to fill entry-level job postings because of talent unavailability. Nearly three quarters of such companies — 74% — report that it takes them more than six months to fill open positions — if they can fill them at all. In 2023, an estimated 48,000 new entry-level roles have the potential to be filled by OY; of these 48,000 new roles, a projected 14,400 OY-appropriate jobs could go unfilled in 2023 without interventions to fill them.

While this paper focuses on Norwalk and surrounding Fairfield County areas, the issues it explores have resonance more broadly in communities that share Fairfield County's high levels of income inequality and cost of living. Many communities across the United States are facing similar challenges.

This paper proposes ways to more efficiently address the specific and systemic barriers OY and the business community face in strengthening the workforce system. At the core, it calls for a more fully representative consortium of local nonprofits, employers, educational institutions, and government operating together with an integrated, collaborative strategy.

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Successful implementation of this approach could move the needle on this issue and serve as a proof point at the state and national levels. Just within Fairfield County, this could mean lifting almost 9,600 OY out of poverty; saving up to almost \$3 billion in taxpayer dollars and almost \$9 billion in social costs over the course of OY's lives; and boosting economic productivity by allowing employers to fill roles they were previously unable to fill.

If we can create the conditions for OY to obtain the education and training needed to succeed in these roles and progress into livable-wage careers in Fairfield County, we can tap into the economic potential to strengthen our region overall. Given the vast economic resources that exist in the region, Fairfield County is poised to take meaningful action to enable OY youth to thrive.

This paper outlines steps to achieve a series of positive outcomes for OY pursuing jobs in Fairfield County, including:

- placing OY job seekers into livable-wage career tracks,
- providing upward progression along chosen career paths, and
- enabling further training and industry credentialing.

The following approach is used to identify the optimal strategy to achieve these objectives:

1. Understand existing barriers for OY in Norwalk and Fairfield County.
2. Establish context to inform interventions.
3. Identify potential interventions for OY as they navigate their journey.
4. Identify potential interventions for employers.
5. Propose discussion points to support key stakeholders in creating actionable, collaborative strategies.

Researchers analyzed data and interviewed more than 40 key stakeholders in Fairfield County to identify potential interventions and best practices. This research produced four critical takeaways:

- **Interventions should focus on supporting OY across the Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway**, which stresses building economic mobility for workers in origin jobs (below-livable wage, <\$42,000 per year) by enabling progression through gateway jobs (livable wage, around \$42,000 per year) to target jobs (middle- to higher-wage, >\$42,000 per year).
- **Getting an origin job is only the first step in the Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway.** The goal of progressing from origin to gateway to target jobs requires that OY are provided the support they need along the way.
- **Identifying the moments that matter most for Opportunity Youth is critical to providing targeted interventions accordingly.** Each intervention should target a specific step in the OY Journey, which consists of pivotal moments along a career pathway that most affect career progression, e.g., applying for an origin job. Interventions broadly involve (1) access to information, (2) job preparation, (3) upskilling and training, and (4) supportive wraparound services.
- **Nonprofit organizations, employers, educational institutions (e.g., high schools, community colleges), private funders, and local governments all have a role to play and expertise to offer in delivering the range of supports OY need** — and all of these stakeholders stand to benefit from supporting this population. These intervention strategies must be specific to both the career paths OY choose and the specific industries OY target. By working together strategically, each of these stakeholders have an opportunity to change lives and strengthen Fairfield County's economy for decades to come.

Glossary

ALICE: Acronym for *Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed*.

ALICE threshold: Represents the bare minimum cost of household necessities to live and work in the modern economy. These essential budget items include housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care, and technology, plus taxes and a contingency fund (miscellaneous) equal to 10% of the household budget.

Fairfield County (FC): A county in the southwestern corner of Connecticut.

Fairfield County's Business Collaborative for Education Equity (BCEE): A strategic partnership formed by local businesses and Fairfield County's Community Foundation in 2020 to promote education equity in Fairfield County.

Livable-Wage Attainment Pathway: A model that stresses building economic mobility for "origin" workers by enabling progression through "gateway" to "target" jobs:

- **Origin jobs:** Below-livable wage (<\$42,000 annual salary) jobs.
- **Gateway jobs:** Livable-wage (>\$42,000 annual salary) jobs with opportunity to build skills.
- **Target jobs:** Middle- to higher-wage (>\$42,000 annual salary) occupations that are resilient to automation and accessible based on job experience, not just credentials.

Livable-wage employment: Employment with salary above the ALICE threshold (~\$42,000 per year in Fairfield County)

NPO: Nonprofit organization.

Opportunity Youth (OY): Young adults aged 14-24 without a high school or postsecondary degree; an estimated 40,000 OY live in Connecticut.

Opportunity Youth Journey: The moments along OY's career journey that most affect career progression, for example:

- Facing decision about the future
- Deciding on next career/education step
- Applying for origin job (if decision was career path)
- Working at an origin job
- Succeeding at an origin job and advancing into a gateway/target job



Business Collaborative for Education Equity

TOGETHER WE THRIVE

Our mission

The Fairfield County Business Collaborative for Education Equity is a multi-year local impact and funding partnership helping to reduce and eliminate educational disparities among Fairfield County's most vulnerable pre-K through 12+ students, their parents and guardians, as well as teachers and staff.