recovery program specialists to develop relationships with students, earn their trust, and undertake the intensive case management required to return students to the educational system.

Since Fall 2007, CYC has helped 39 of the 300 DPS dropouts re-engage in school. Another 37 youth are currently involved in case management with CYC, while an additional 47 are in the process of being contacted.

Dropout Intervention
National research shows that the most effective time to intervene in order to reduce dropout rates is in the 8th and 9th grades. This research indicates that students who do not accumulate sufficient credit to move to the 10th grade on time are at an increased risk of dropping out. Given these findings, CYC obtained funding to create a 9th grade intervention program at West High School. CYC recruited 30 volunteers to tutor students in algebra to help them pass this “gatekeeper course” to graduation. Initial results indicate significant success, with 91 percent earning a C or better in the class.

Action Items and Insights

1. Create an early identification system to alert school staff to students at risk of failing 9th grade. Have sufficient dropout intervention strategies in place to ensure retention and graduation.

2. Understand that dropouts do not fit into a one-size-fits-all program. Each youth has a story. Variations in student age, credits needed to graduate, and personal backgrounds create a need for innovative, customized educational programs.

3. Listen to youth’s views on the types of programs needed. The opinions of youth add depth and understanding to this issue. For example, when CYC asked youth what their perfect school environment would look like, they indicated greater flexibility in hours, smaller class sizes, and individualized help from teachers and tutors.

4. Build relationships with students to strengthen dropout intervention and recovery programs. Programs must have adequate staffing so that each student has time to develop trust and to ask for help when needed.

5. Help students re-enter the educational system by providing program staff to help each student explore options and navigate the required paperwork.

6. Conduct in-depth research and evaluation of new and existing programs. The results will help determine the effectiveness of programs and identify appropriate prevention and recovery efforts.

References

The unacceptable dropout rate in Denver Public Schools (DPS) is not endemic to Denver alone. Large numbers of youth across the nation are leaving school before graduating. A March 2006 Gates Foundation report labeled our national high school dropout problem a “silent epidemic.” On the heels of this report, Time Magazine’s April 17, 2006 cover story began with the caption, “Dropout Nation – Special Report: 10% of America’s high school students will leave without graduating.”

The DPS dropout rate reflects the local embodiment of this far-reaching problem. A May 2005 “Early Exit: Denver’s Graduation Gap,” asked: “What happened?” 5,663 students started the eighth grade and 1,884 graduated from DPS.

According to Education Week, a national database compiled by the U.S. Secretary of Education, the overall graduation rate in DPS for 2003 was 47 percent. The Colorado Department of Education puts the raw number of DPS dropouts for 2004-05 at 4,017.

An analysis of the 2006 DPS graduates shows large gaps in gender and among ethnic groups. The Latino rates are particularly concerning, as Latino youth represent some 60 percent of the students in DPS.

Dropout Recovery
Although dropout prevention efforts have been in place for several decades, federal studies indicate their impact has been mixed. Dropout recovery, on the other hand, has garnered limited attention and limited resources. While prevention efforts can help in some instances, the real leverage in impacting out-of-school youth is allowing them to experience the consequences of dropping out. For example, most are unemployable due to age and skill restrictions; they may face difficult situations at home; and with their friends in school, they become bored.

Out-of-school youth soon understand the reality of their situation. Many decide they made a mistake and want to return to school. However, once they realize their need for education, they face the daunting task of how and where to get back into school. Resources and help are lacking for young people wishing to re-enroll.
Recognizing the disparity between the desire of out-of-school youth to return to school and the lack of resources provided for these young people, Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC), a Denver-based nonprofit, is dedicated to helping dropouts return to school. CYC employs Educational Outreach Specialists to respond to referrals from DPS, Urban Peak, the Denver Housing Authority, Servicios de la Raza, and other high schools and nonprofit organizations. Out-of-school youth are also identified through networking, outreach, referrals from other youth helped by CYC, and by the youth themselves.

### Serving the Unique Needs of Dropouts

Out-of-school youth do not fit into a one-size-fits-all program. A CYC partnership with Denver Public Schools (DPS) to facilitate recovery efforts for 1,716 students who dropped out of high school in the 2006-07 school year serves as a case in point. CYC sorted the student data to determine students’ ages and course credit attained. CYC’s findings uncovered the need for new types of educational programs to serve re-entering students. For example, of the 2006-07 DPS dropouts, just 3 percent were in situations where they could easily and successfully return to the traditional school system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Educational Programs Needed for Dropouts</th>
<th>26%</th>
<th>43%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Schools</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>GED Programs with Post-Senior/ Career Assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alternative Schools for Older Students</td>
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To help address the shortage of alternative educational programs for dropouts returning to school, CYC collaborated with DPS and other local nonprofits to create the West Career Academy (WCA), a school within a school at West High School. WCA targets students who dropped out after attaining junior- or senior-level credit and are close to graduating. During 2007-08, WCA is serving 85 returning students, creating a personalized environment, wrap-around support services, and access to career/technical training programs.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Outreach Efforts Pay Off</th>
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<tr>
<td>Checking in and following up with the student and school staff once the student re-enrolls</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creating a support network of local service providers and programs</td>
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</table>

To assist the Denver community in understanding the reality of bringing youth back to school, CYC tracked and analyzed its efforts and results with 300 of the 1,716 DPS dropouts from 2006-07 who had accrued the most credit. Results of this outreach to recent high school dropouts informs practitioners and policymakers about what happens to youth once they leave school, and the feasibility of outreach and recovery programs. It also points to the need for adequate staffing to allow