

# Back Together Again

Reengaging K-12 Students Through  
District-Community Collaboration

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Executive Summary  
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**W**hen students leave school lacking credits for a high school credential, they often don't have any idea where, or even if, there is a door to get back in. Such disengaged students, known as opportunity youth, need help navigating their way back on track. Nationally many communities are establishing reengagement centers or systems to meet the needs of these disconnected youth by reaching out, and offering assessments, referrals, and other supports for a transition to an educational pathway of some sort – a high school diploma, GED, community college, apprenticeship, internship, and/or industry certification. Young people face a myriad of situations when they do not fit easily into the one-size fits all design of most high schools, and their social, emotional, economic and physical needs extend beyond what can be met readily by teachers or a school counselor in many typical comprehensive high schools.

No one right way exists to reengage students and there is no single best way to run a reengagement system or program. Nevertheless, some communities are making significant inroads by developing a range of models that capitalize on local resources and opportunities. This report focuses on four such communities where the local school districts are an integral reengagement partner from the start and describes what it takes for a school district-community partnership to succeed in reengaging students. It includes descriptions of these four exemplar communities: Portland OR, Boston MA, Dubuque IA, and South King County (suburban Seattle) WA, which all exemplify new, non-linear ways partners meet their own organizational needs and interests while also jointly meeting the wide-ranging needs of youth.

## Challenges to Collaboration

Effective reengagement requires building a second chance system that connects schooling options with a variety of supports, knitting together systems and funding streams. To do so involves creativity, authenticity, persistence and courage among all parties. And that work is not always easy.

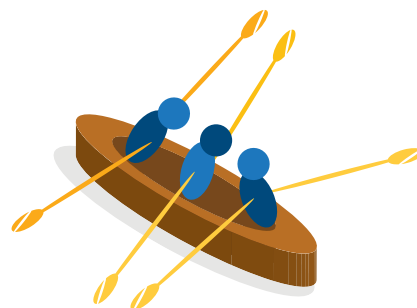
During a feedback session, communities described their district-community partnerships in terms of these telling metaphors:



**Our partnership is like a car with square tires; the ride is bumpy, but we do get there.**

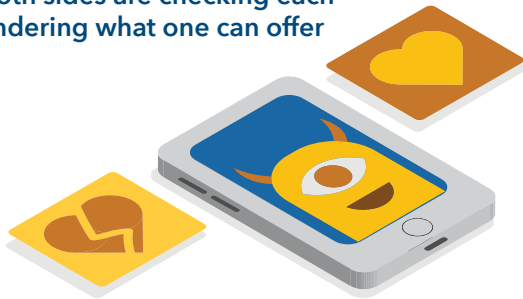


**We are an undaunted rowing team that can brave all kinds of weather, but we are not always rowing in sync or the same direction.**



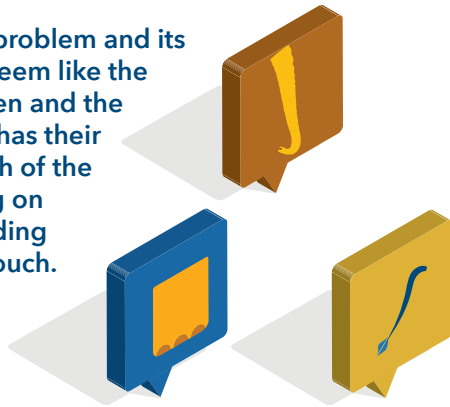
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Both the school district and the community are on a dating app where the district looks like a mysterious behemoth of a potential partner and both sides are checking each other out, wondering what one can offer the other.



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The reengagement problem and its potential solutions seem like the fable of the blind men and the elephant: everyone has their own take on the truth of the situation, depending on where they are standing and what they can touch.



In spite of these varying challenges to collaboration, communities are actively innovating as they search together for best practice when serving reengaged students.

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**“The most important thing I’ve learned about reengagement work is that you have to start before you’re ready.” – Former Superintendent**

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## Solutions

Some common themes around how to partner effectively together and design effective reengagement approaches emerged across the four communities featured in this report. The themes reflect places where partners noted how they are moving ahead collaboratively to modify established practices and ways of working, potentially setting the stage for future policy shifts.

### Set It Up Right

- **Districts and community partners recommend shifting processes and practices *before* policies.** Rather than seeking district policy changes that would officially dictate new rules, school leaders at the system and building levels strive to shift internal practices and processes as they are warranted by evidence of progress in the right direction.
- **Define the problem well.** By analyzing who disconnects from school including their age, credits earned, grade level, and school attended, leaders create smarter plans tailored to their communities.
- **By analyzing students’ histories of disconnection and reengagement and by listening to youth themselves, critical information can be gleaned to inform system improvement.** Youth have stories to tell: when adults listen, they learn what to fix and why.
- **When funding strands can be braided together, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.** Partners strategically leverage workforce dollars, state per student allocations, and social services supports deciding who can fund what under which conditions to meet students’ needs.

## Program Design Matters

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- **Match student needs with a pathway to future school and work success.** A ‘best fit’ approach matching students’ needs with school strengths, culture, and opportunities works well. Communities use a combination of district reengagement options and others run by community non-profits and/or community colleges to complement their traditional high schools.
- **Teachers of reengaging youth benefit from tailored professional development.** When youth need to catch up quickly and fill in learning gaps, teachers need to hone sophisticated new skills to make sure students achieve.
- **Reengagement Centers report serving disproportionate numbers of special education students; districts struggle to provide the services and certified staff required legally to serve them.** Districts are creating ways to meet federal mandates by ensuring central office oversight guides teaching at reengagement centers, and district staff can regularly consult or work at both reengagement centers and other schools.

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**“Dropout has a common meaning. Kids know the way the world looks at them and the way they look at themselves - the feelings, emotions, what it means. People look at you like you’re a failure and even if they don’t say it you feel it.” – Outreach Specialist quoting a reengaged student**

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## Policies Make A Difference

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- **District and community reengagement partnerships seek accountability frameworks that accurately reflect the scope and details of the problems to be addressed and what it really takes to successfully get youth back on track.** To measure reengagement success, partners monitor academic progress, persistence, school attendance, success at the next level of school or career, and more.
- **Washington State’s state-level reengagement policy can inform other states seeking to incentivize community efforts to reengage youth.** Designed to encourage school-community partnerships, Washington’s Open Doors policy allocates funding for reengaged students and offers guidance for implementation.

## Conclusion

While preventing disengagement will always be a goal of school districts, facing the reality that some youth will disengage from school is essential. If district and community leaders, in partnership, seek to actively learn why students disengage, then systems can improve performance and youth will be well-served.

The communities consulted for this report expressed optimism that progress is being made. Acknowledging there is always more to learn, they encouraged the sharing of good ideas and welcomed the support of thought partners who can help communities work smarter.

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