

July 2017

The Connecticut Opportunity Project is a collaborative endeavor to unleash the tremendous untapped potential of young people who are disengaged or disconnected from high schools in Connecticut. Today, 39,000 high school-aged youth are disengaged or disconnected from school – equaling more than one in five high school students. Through the Opportunity Project, educators, non-profit leaders, youth counselors, mentors, mayors, and young people have joined together to develop innovative solutions to improve the life opportunities and educational outcomes of youth in Connecticut.

In July 2017, the Dalio Foundation committed nearly \$11,000,000 for the Opportunity Project's two-year pilot phase to support the work of nine founding partners: City of New Haven, COMPASS Youth Collaborative, Connecticut RISE Network, Domus Kids, DonorsChoose.org, GripTape, Hartford Youth Service Corps, Nutmeg Big Brothers-Big Sisters, and The Future Project. These partners were selected, in part, due to their ability to collaborate with local stakeholders at scale. Over the next two years, the Opportunity Project aims to empower 9,500 young people by engaging dozens of non-profit leaders, public schools, and youth counselors, and more than 100 mentors, 200 youth, and 800 educators in communities across the state. Please visit www.ctopportunityproject.org to learn more about these founding partners and their innovative and exciting ideas to engage young people.

Working Together for Positive Outcomes

To succeed long-term, the Opportunity Project must transcend boundaries and communities and serve as an energizing force for positive youth outcomes in Connecticut. Young people who are disengaged or disconnected from high school call nearly every community in the state home. There are 113 school systems (roughly two-thirds of all districts in the state) that are home to at least 50 disengaged or disconnected youth.

By working together, stakeholders across Connecticut can build the Opportunity Project as a platform that will function as a magnet for champions, lab for solutions, and springboard for action by:

- Attracting and convening a growing and diverse set of leaders who are motivated to work collaboratively toward the goal of engaging all youth and preparing them for success;
- Becoming a statewide community in which new ideas are being developed, tested, proven, and shared, ensuring that all practitioners are equipped with the knowledge and tools to better serve youth who are disengaged or disconnected from high school; and
- Operating as a distribution network for ideas that work, magnifying our impact beyond the direct community of innovators in order to build broader momentum for changes and innovations that support the needs of every young person.

While this work is not easy, the Opportunity Project and its founding partners are hopeful and believe strongly that significant progress can be made when ideas and commitments from stakeholders across the state combine to generate innovative strategies and solutions. The Opportunity Project aspires to work with all stakeholders to help put all youth on a path to success, and to achieve greater equity and prosperity across Connecticut.

The Initiative and Innovation Challenge

In September 2016, Barbara Dalio and the Dalio Foundation helped to initiate the Opportunity Project with the release of an independent report, *Untapped Potential: Engaging all Connecticut Youth*, and the launch of www.ctopportunityproject.org to achieve three main goals: inform the general public about the urgent need to reach and re-engage youth who are disengaged or disconnected from high school; share research around patterns in the educational experiences of these youth that can help shape potential solutions; and galvanize leaders and citizens to support all young people in graduating from high school ready for the future.

Simultaneously, the Dalio Foundation kicked off a pilot innovation challenge, soliciting ideas from individuals, non-profit organizations, and partnerships across Connecticut. The pilot was designed to identify partners, raise awareness, spur innovation, and seed promising projects in urban, rural, and suburban communities. In December 2016, the Foundation received almost 80 submissions showcasing a diverse set of proposed ideas and initiatives, ranging from workforce preparation and out-of-school programming to tutoring and school design.

The Foundation, with support from community stakeholders, completed a multi-step review process to carefully evaluate all submissions against criteria and design principles. They assessed each submission by evaluating the extent to which a proposal was compelling, realistic, meaningful, replicable, and aligned to a broader statewide strategy. They looked for evidence that the proposal was informed by research and practices proven to foster positive youth development and resiliency. They also looked for connections and synergies across proposed initiatives and geographies. Finally, they considered additional factors including available resources, capacity to support new or emerging initiatives, and the overall quality of submissions.

The Opportunity Project's pilot innovation challenge represents the Foundation's initial response to the findings in *Untapped Potential: Engaging all Connecticut Youth*. Over time, the Foundation hopes additional funders will join in this collaborative endeavor. With the knowledge that more than one in five high school-aged youth in Connecticut are disengaged or disconnected from school, the Opportunity Project must form a broad coalition of leaders committed to solving a challenge that affects nearly every community in the state. The Foundation believes we can make progress when we work together, and hopes that you'll be open to future invitations to join in this critical effort.