

# Don't leave youth behind in the job market

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Special to The Sun

The sharper than expected declines in state revenues in recent months have placed added pressures on the Massachusetts Legislature to find additional cost savings, including the elimination of programs funded out of the general budget. Among the programs currently being considered for major reduction in funding or elimination are the Connecting Activities program and the YouthWorks program. Both programs have helped provide well-needed jobs for the state's teens in recent years, including those with educational and economical disadvantages.

Over the last two years, in the Greater Lowell region alone, almost 900 students and youth have received job placements with 438 companies and organizations, as a result of YouthWorks and Connecting Activities. Additionally, Connecting Activities administers an annual youth job fair in Lowell, attended routinely by over 600 youth and at least 30 local employers. YouthWorks runs a very successful summer program that even the employers attest to being highly appreciative for the youth that were matched with them.

At a time when finding employment is so difficult, in particularly for teens and young adults, there is a strong case to be made for the continuation of both YouthWorks and Connecting Activities.

Labor market opportunities for 16-19 year olds in the U.S. have collapsed to record new post-World War II lows in the past year. Fewer than 30 percent of the nation's teens have been working in recent months versus 45 percent as recently as 2000 and nearly 50 percent in 1989.

Teen employment rates in Massachusetts also have declined considerably over the past eight years. Between January and March of this year, only 28 percent of the state's teens were employed, a new historical low for the state. In 1999-2000, nearly 51 percent of state teens were working. Our state's ranking among the 50 states in providing jobs for teens has declined from being a national leader (11th highest) in the late 1980s to mediocrity (26th) in the most recent year.

The deterioration in state teen employment rates has affected every major demographic, socioeconomic, and schooling subgroup of teens in our state, including high school dropouts and graduates.

There are a number of key features of the Connecting Activities and YouthWorks programs that add to their attractiveness as workforce development strategies for the state's teens.

First, the funds provided to support Connecting Activities Programs help provide both year-round and summer internship opportunities for high school students, and YouthWorks was recently expanded to include year-round. Year-round jobs provide more cumulative work experience and offer greater opportunities for learning new skills.

Second, unlike the WIA-funded summer youth employment program, which was desirably brought back to life under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, participation in the Connecting Activities program is not restricted to economically disadvantaged youth.

The existing YouthWorks program allows youth with family incomes under 200 percent of the poverty line to participate, and there are no income eligibility restrictions under the Connecting Activities program. Many low to middle-income high school students have faced severe difficulties finding jobs in our state in the past few years and would benefit from participation in Connecting Activities and YouthWorks programs.

Third, the Connecting Activities program provides youth with access to a wide array of jobs in the private-for-profit sector as well as the non-profit and public sector.

In the past year alone students were provided internships with 5,624 employers across the state.

The national and state recessions have taken a severe toll on job opportunities for teens and young adults in our state over the past 18 months. National economic forecasters have recently projected that the recession will end by the late fall, but that the economic recovery beginning in 2010 will be quite modest.

Since teen employment typically lags the recovery of overall employment by at least one to two years, teen employment will not likely begin to recover until 2012. The Legislature and the Governor should prioritize these investments in our young people's future in the fiscal 2010 budget.

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