It Takes More than a Superhero: Promoting Youth Thriving through Webs of Support

Jonathan Zaff, Ph.D.

CERES Institute for Children and Youth

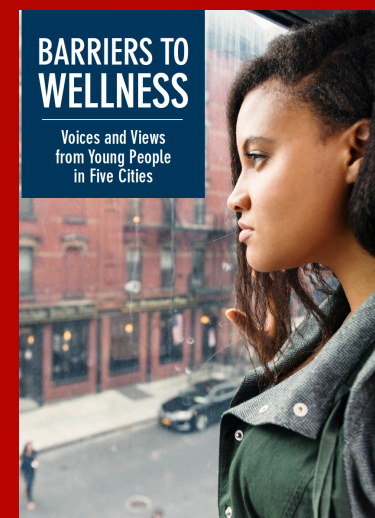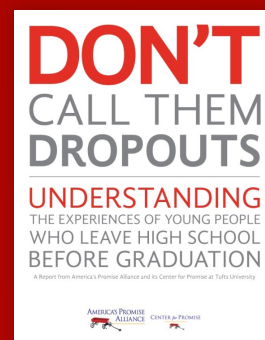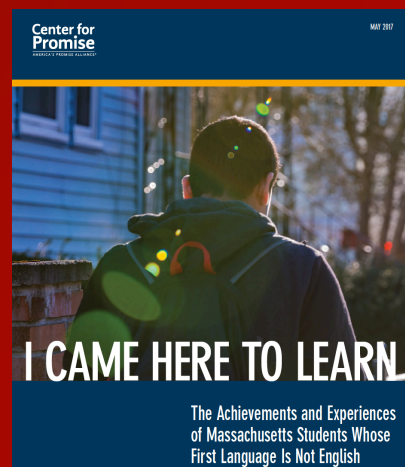BU | Wheelock College of Education & Human Development

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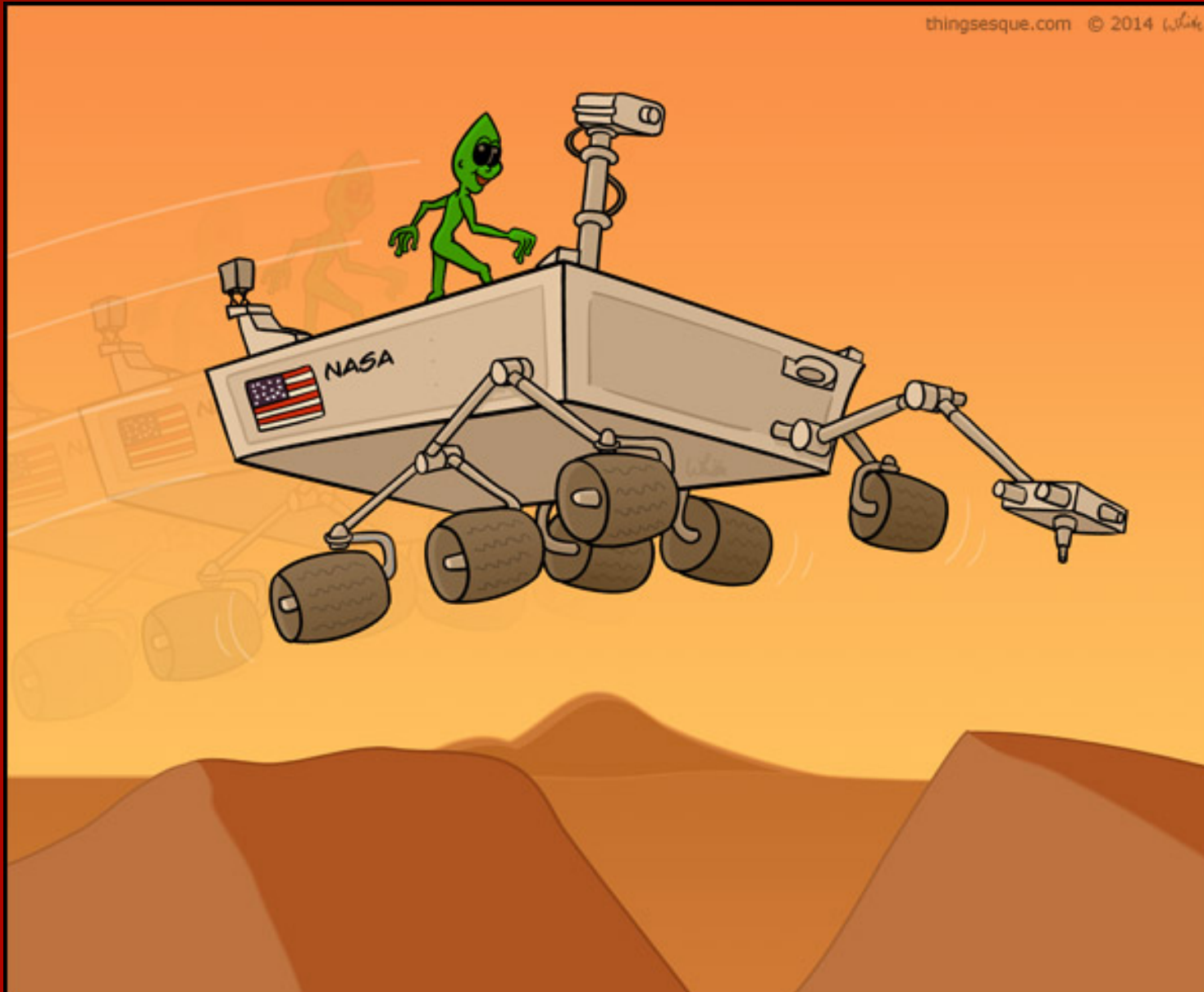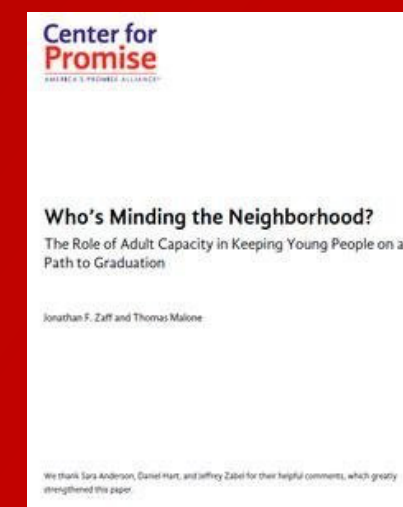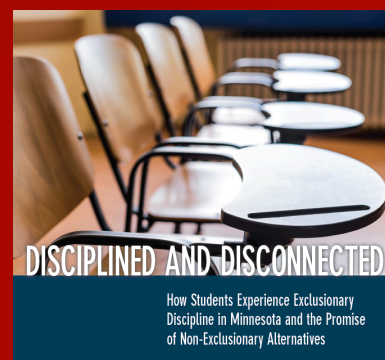
Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

4.9 million youth in United States
(12% of 16-24 year-olds) Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

14% of Latino/a youth, 19% of Black/African-American youth, and 25% of indigenous youth

Lifetime fiscal cost of $1.1 trillion

Three Questions

1. Who are young people?

2. What do these young people need to thrive in school and in life?

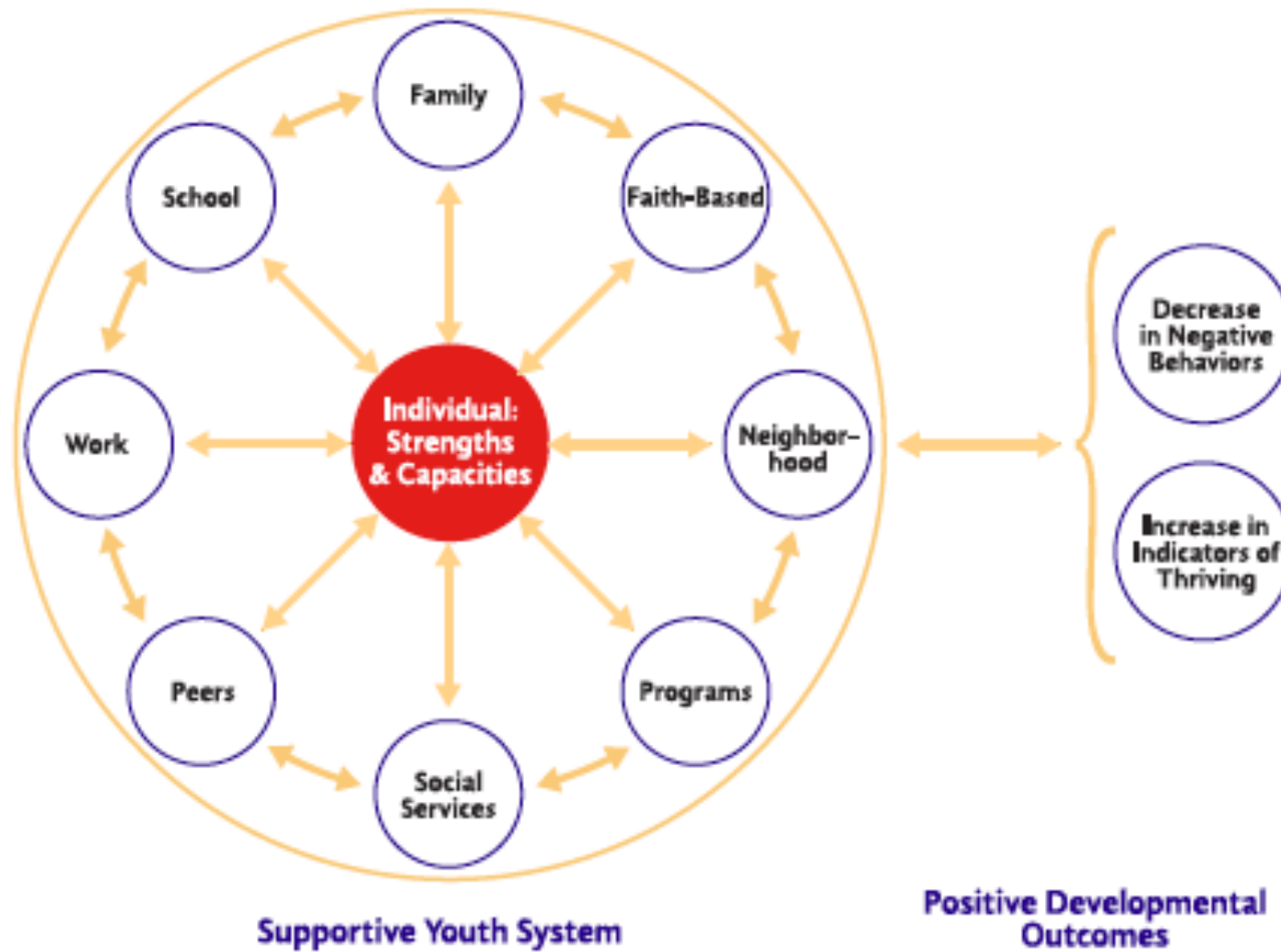3. How can "we" provide these young people with what they need?

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Parents

Service Providers

Youth System

Community

Schools

Supportive Youth System · Positive Developmental Outcomes

Diagram: Central red circle labeled "Individual: Strengths & Capacities" surrounded by circles labeled Family, Faith-Based, Neighborhood, Programs, Social Services, Peers, Work, School — all connected with bidirectional arrows. An arrow leads from Neighborhood to two circles labeled "Decrease in Negative Behaviors" and "Increase in Indicators of Thriving."

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Adverse Life Experiences

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Youth who leave school face much more adversity than their peers who graduate on time:

5.3 ALEs compared to 2.7 ALEs

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Changed Residential Location   Loss of a Parent

Foster System   **DRUG USE**   **Suspended or Expelled**

Lack of Preparation for High School   **Regular Care Giver**

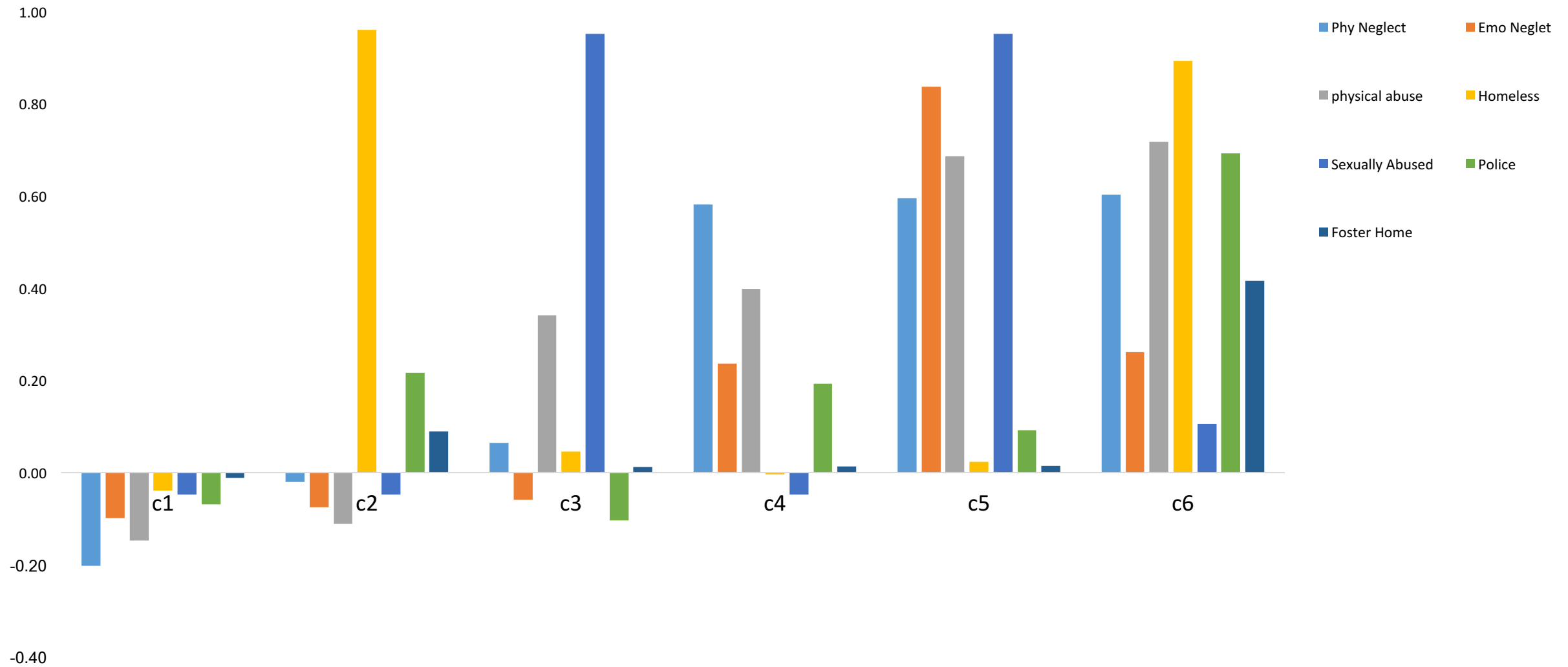*ENDURED ABUSE*   Most friends dropped out   GANG INVOLVEMENT

HOMELESSNESS   *Gave Birth/Fathered a Child*

Changed Schools   **Major Mental Health Issue**

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"Well, my mom's laid up in bed, can't pay the bills. And I turned sixteen and I started roofing [working construction]. Well, eventually weed and everything played into it so much that I seen so much money in my hands that when I went to school it seemed to be a waste of time. You know, I would rather have been on the roof or out hustling making money to pay the bills for my mom cause she's laid up in bed and can't do shit. And my dad never been there; my dad's been in prison since I was ten — doing fifteen years in federal, and he actually gets out in three, no he gets out in two years. I eventually dropped out just 'cause the bills weren't getting paid and I knew I could pay the bills, step up. I never took on responsibility like that before in my life."

— Aaron[16]

"People would be outside of the school waiting for us with guns, so I was forced to bring my gun to school."
— Lance

"And after that I got shot, I got shot in my leg, and they started sending me homework from school … and I was doin' it and all of a sudden I started drinking and I got a little bit depressed, and just tired of it, you know, I don't want to do it no more, and I just quit."
— Paul

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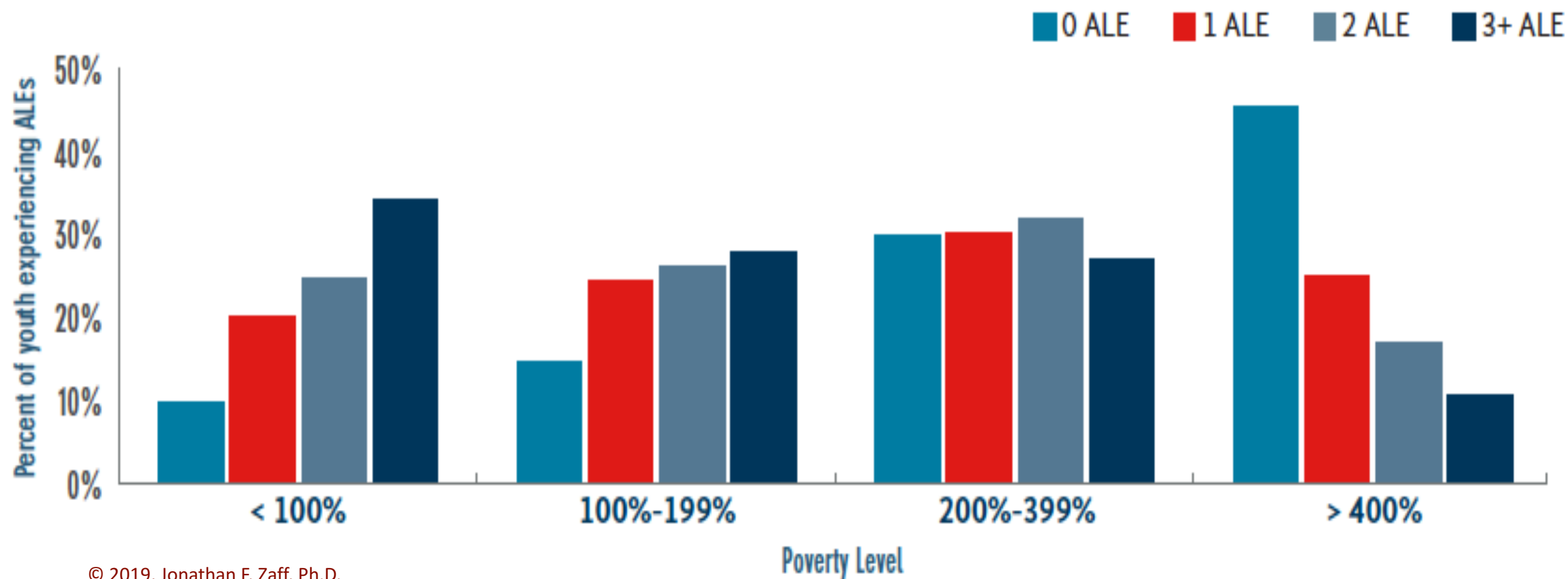
Figure 2: ALE index by poverty level

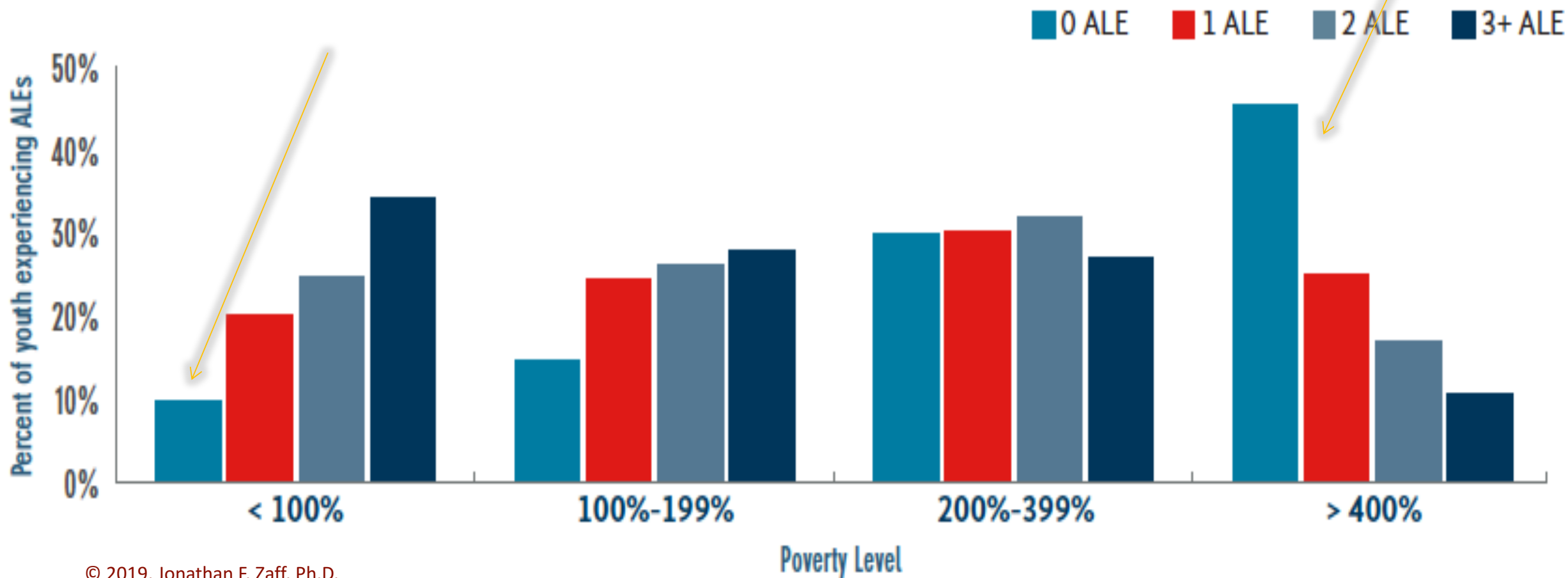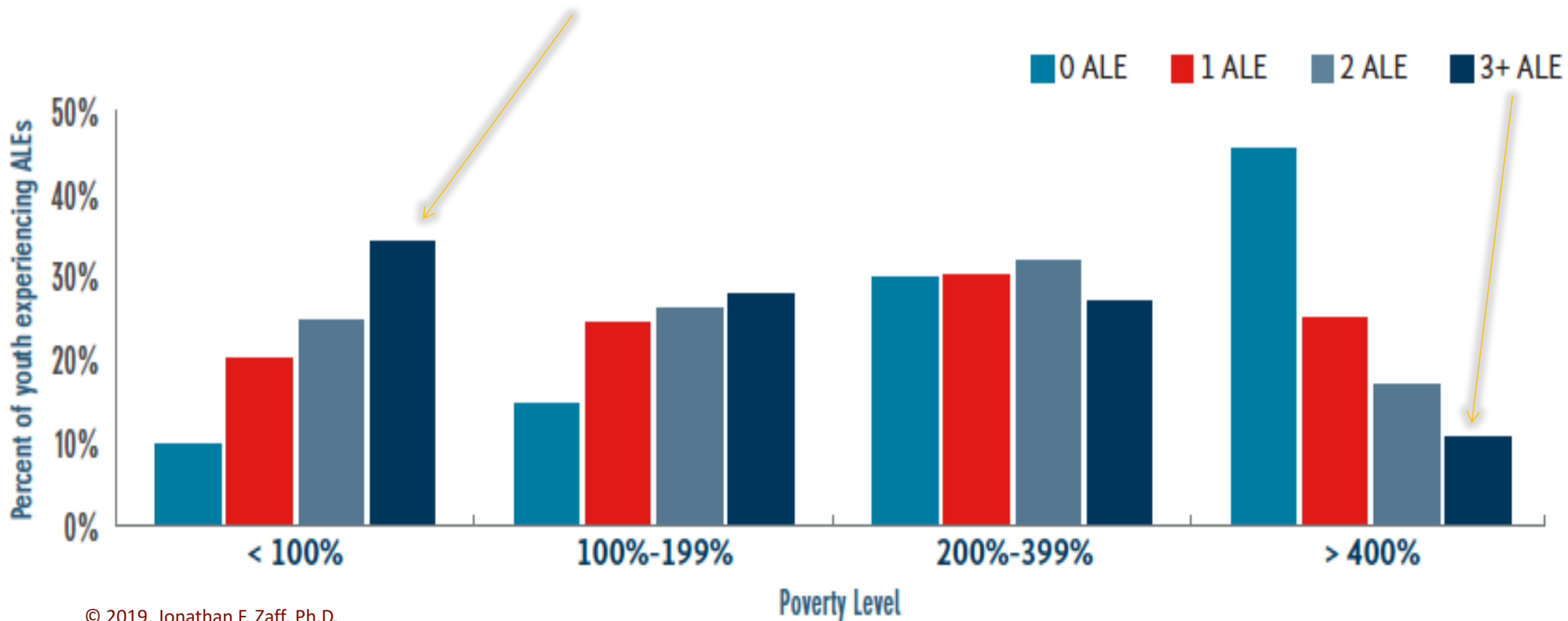Figure 2: ALE index by poverty level

Figure 2: ALE index by poverty level

Social and Emotional Competencies

Self-Awareness – understand own emotions

Self-Management – regulate thoughts, emotions, behaviors

Social Awareness – take perspective of others

Relationship Skills – establish and maintain healthy relationships

Responsible Decision-Making – make constructive choices

From the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning

Social and Emotional Competencies

"My mom could not cook herself, she could not bathe herself - she couldn't do anything on her own, so I had to step up… I understand that my education is important, but I refuse to let my mom sit there and starve to death, and just…sit in her own filth. I'd rather…take care of my mom, as opposed to going to school."

-- Andrew

From *Dispelling Stereotypes of Young People who Leave School Without Graduating.*

"I used to steal from the back store. I used to steal beef patties and snacks to feed my brothers. My moms was drinking. I used to take charge. They shouldn't have to suffer because of someone else."

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Webs of Support

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"What changes people is relationships. Somebody willing to walk through the shadow of the valley of adolescence with them."

-- Bill Milliken

Social Supports:

Source:

- Parents
- Adults in School
- Adults outside of School
- Peers

Type:

- Emotional
- Instrumental
- Informational
- Appraisal

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" • *When it comes to transportation, it's Ms. C, Ms. D and Ms. J. When it comes to education, it's all of them. When it comes to, like I just want to get stuff off my chest, it's all of them. When it gets really personal, to where I would get upset and shut down and block people out at some points, it would be Ms. W and Ms. J."*

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• **Carlie***

# Foundational, trusting relationship
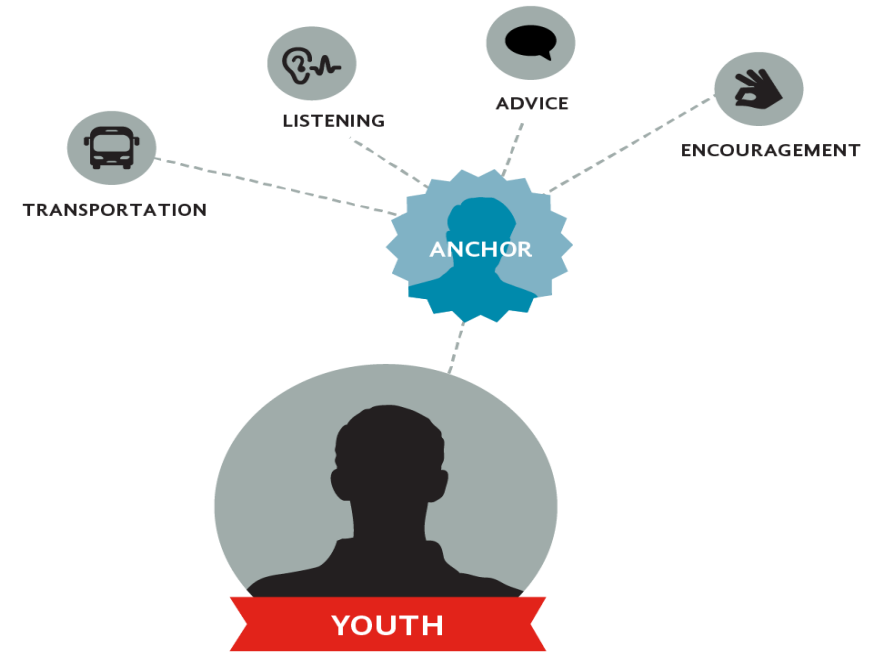
[Ms. Breen] guides everybody through. She make this her home, like for Thanksgiving, kids that didn't have nowhere to go for Thanksgiving, she made Thanksgiving dinner for everybody. Everybody brought something. **She's like the mother of the building, and we her kids.** Because it's like some kids that don't have money for something, she'll just give it to you like that. And they be like, 'Oh, I'll give it back' and she'll be like, 'No don't worry about it, just keep it.' But you can't even go to your mom and ask her some of the stuff but you can go to [Ms. Breen] with. **You can't even talk to your mother about some of the stuff you can talk to somebody like [Ms. Breen] with**, for example. And you tell her stuff and she won't tell everybody."

--Ayesha (alias)

is not enough.
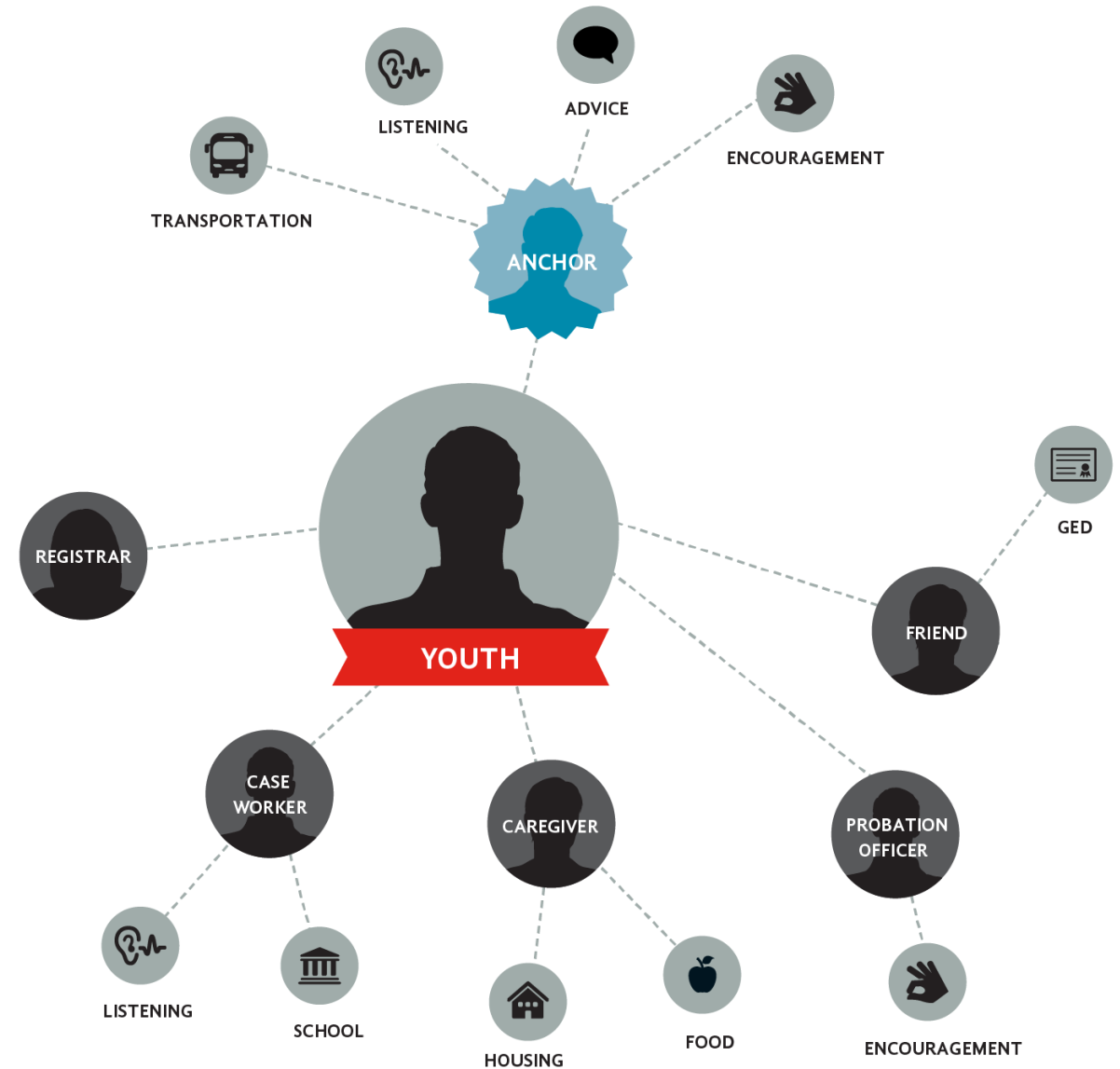
Webs of Support

"Support, supportive people like when I was locked up, **my caseworker, one of these probation officers, [name]…Yeah [and there] was [name of another helpful person] and my therapist over there, …and then at the group home the PD, [name] and then my roommate** he, …he says I'm too smart and that I should already have it. And yeah, support people, mentor, student aid, he's one of them… Just supporting me like if I need somebody, talk to someone then they'll talk to me, keep my mind from going back to old habits and just yeah, stuff like that."

--James (alias)
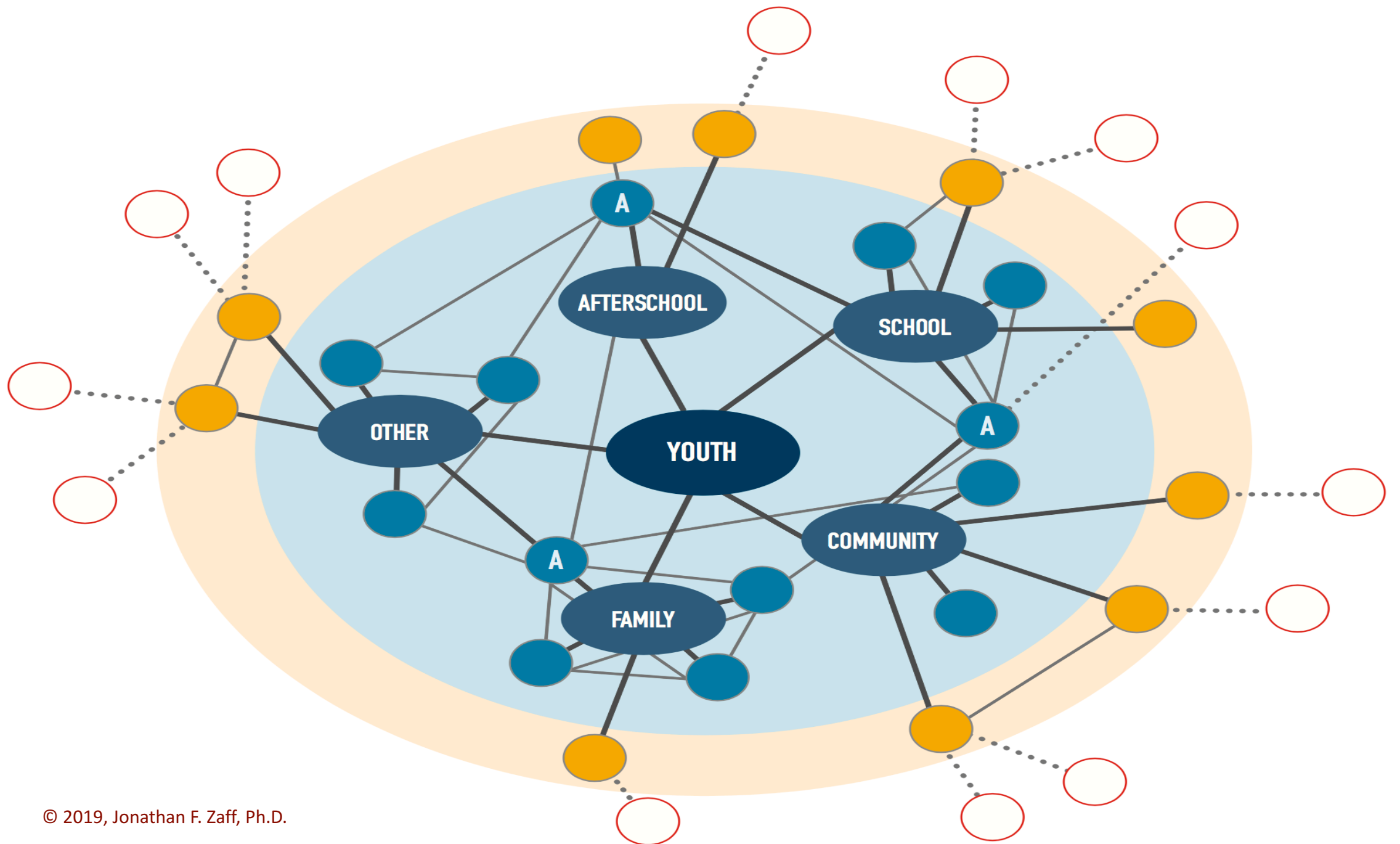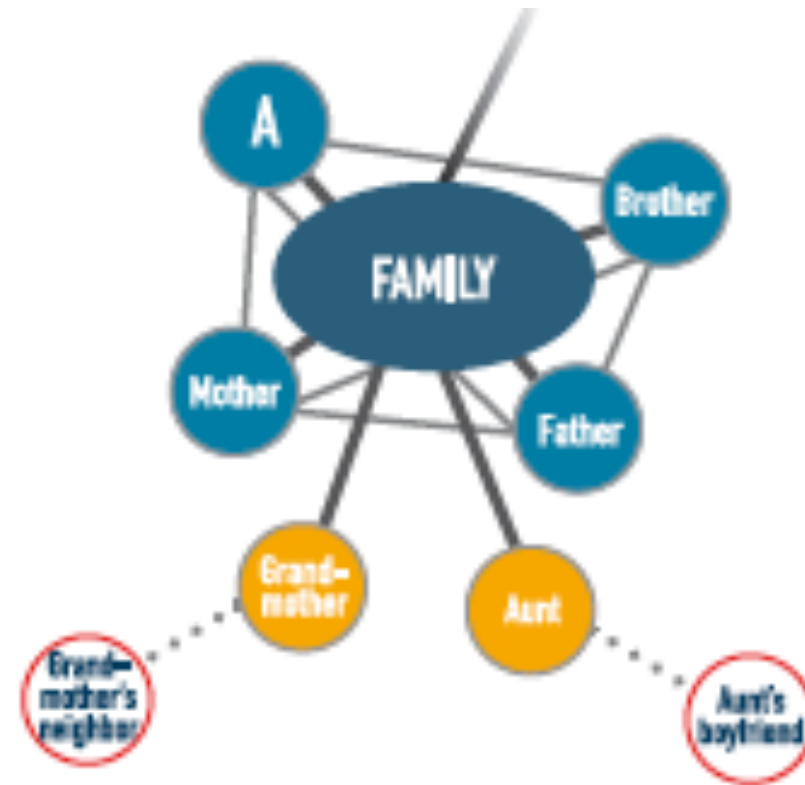
"I was at work and I come home and my mom's like, 'The fire station came by. [Dropout Prevention Team member] came by. Police officers came by. They're like they want you to come back to school.' I was like, 'What?' I was like, 'Don't worry about it.' I was like, 'It's fine.' I was like, 'I'm going to finish just I'm not going back to [traditional high school].' I was still in this mindset where, 'Oh, hell no. I'm not going back.' Then I found out [Dropout Prevention Team member] went to my work and my manager, a close manager to me, she told me.

She's like, 'This guy, [Dropout Prevention Team member], stopped by and he wants you to finish at [traditional high school]. He said he'll see it where you can go back, you won't be embarrassed. It'll be comfortable. You can go back.' I was like, 'I don't know. Really, I feel like I should be out of there. My feeling that I feel being with all those other kids, I don't belong there anymore.' She was like, 'Well, just see. Just go find out and see.' I was like, 'Well, okay.' Then that's when he called later on that day too and my mom was on the phone with him. I was like, 'Okay.' Then he wanted to meet up, so I was like, 'Fine. I'll go down to the school and see what's going on.' Then that's when I went down there and just talked to him and ... Yeah, he went out of his way to get special permission from the district where I can only have one class in the morning. I saw the effort he was putting in and I was like, 'Fine. I don't see why not.' I don't want to be that stubborn like, 'Oh, you're going through all this. Nah. I'm still not going to go.' I was like, 'Fine. I'll go with it.' I did and now I'm going back."

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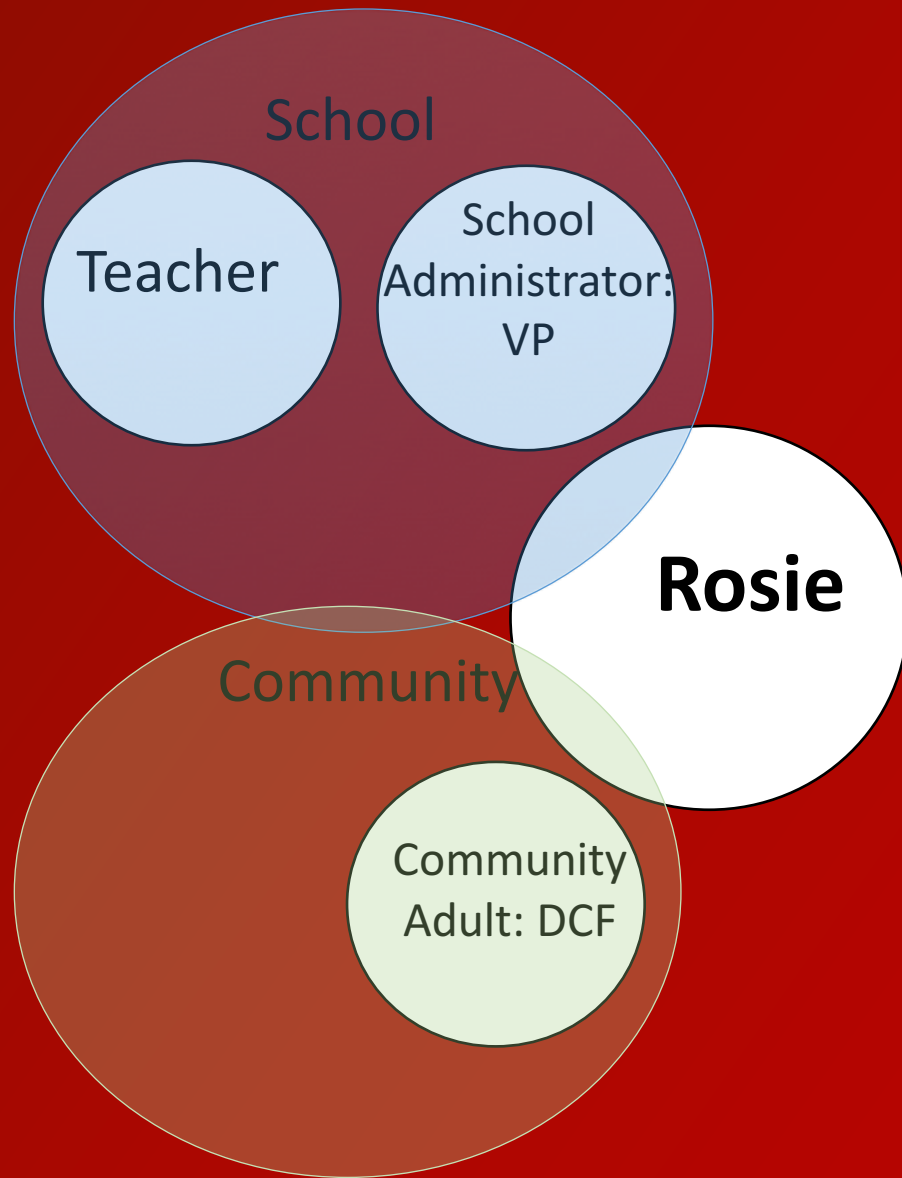3. **How can "we" provide these young people with what they need?**

Relationships Come First

"I think one of the biggest factors [for re-engaging] that I've heard again and again from young people is trust, which I think has to do with building caring relationships with adults, and being able to trust that even adults… [because many young people get into the situation where they meet adults] who are saying they have your interest in mind that aren't necessarily trustworthy."
– Youth on the Rise Member

We get to build relationships and trust with these kids. We're on their team and we're here to help them. With that being said, we build those bonds. Once those bonds are built, we can go into the schools and advocate for these kids and say, "Hey! You know this young lady here, she's going through this situation."

The most [important] thing I think we do, probably, this might be unique to dropout prevention, is our home visits. We've connected with the parents a lot more than most people in the school. I think the home visits piece is, I think, what we do. It's probably the most important part of our re-engagement to the students." -TUSD Dropout Prevention Team

Disengagement

School

Teacher

School Administrator: VP

Rosie

Community

Community Adult: DCF

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Re-Engagement

Program

Family

School

Program Staff: NS

Lawyer (mentor)

Program Staff: Chaser

Program Staff: NS

Program Staff: Head Coordinator

Program Culture

Grandmother

Rosie

Peer

Ex Partner

Teacher

Teacher

School Staff: NS

Friend

School Staff: NS

Tutor

Peer

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- Providing educational experiences that fit youth's lives.

- Providing reliable, consistent support and connection opportunities.

- Offering work-readiness strategies and practical work experience.

- Facilitating or providing access to comprehensive support services.

- Encouraging supportive relationships with adults and peers.

"If we do not build strong relationships with our

young people, we cannot transform their lives."

--Vision Keeper/Sustainer, Café Momentum

FIGURE 1: TRADITIONAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND WORKFORCE READINESS MODEL

Admissions & Enrollment

Career Development & Workforce Readiness Program Inputs

- Didactic Skill Instruction
- Resume Assistance
- Professional Networking
- Mock Interviewing
- Job/Internship Search

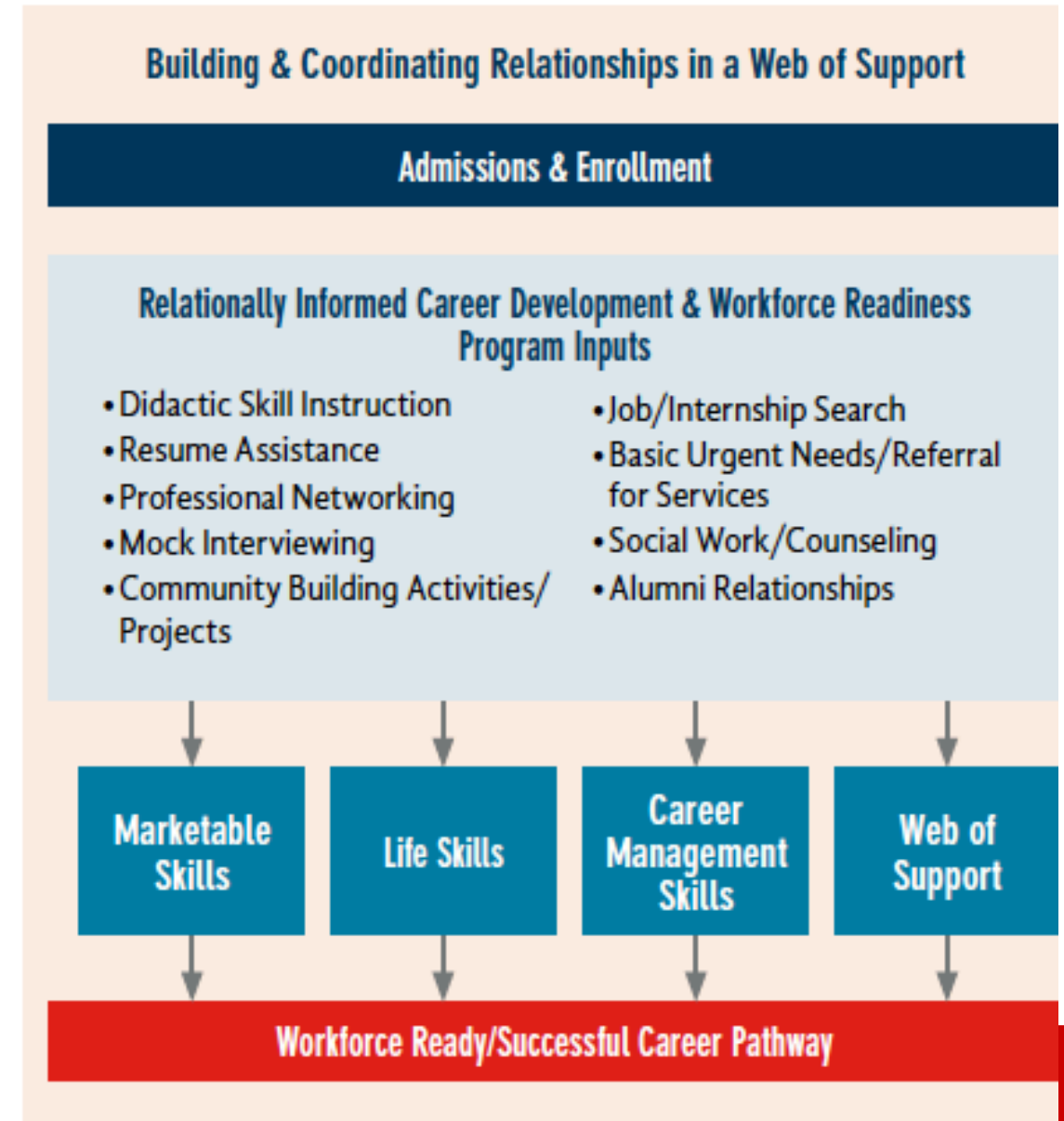**Marketable Skills**

Life Skills

Career Management Skills

Workforce Ready/Successful Career Pathway

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FIGURE 2: RELATIONALLY INFORMED CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND WORKFORCE READINESS PROGRAM

Building & Coordinating Relationships in a Web of Support

Admissions & Enrollment

Relationally Informed Career Development & Workforce Readiness Program Inputs

- Didactic Skill Instruction
- Resume Assistance
- Professional Networking
- Mock Interviewing
- Community Building Activities/ Projects
- Job/Internship Search
- Basic Urgent Needs/Referral for Services
- Social Work/Counseling
- Alumni Relationships

Marketable Skills

Life Skills

Career Management Skills

Web of Support

Workforce Ready/Successful Career Pathway

Relationship-Focused School "Discipline"

- **Strengthen relationships** among school personnel, students, and families.

- Allow disciplinary action to provide an **opportunity for conversation**

- **Create learning communities** for educators and school leaders to discuss effective strategies for lowering the rate of school exclusion.

- **Support district exploration of non-exclusionary discipline practices.**

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"…But you can't get to the relevance, you can't get to tutoring algebra, you can't do any of that without the relationship first."

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Disciplined and Disconnected |

THANK YOU!

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