



State of the South 2014: What is an “infrastructure of opportunity”?

This edition of the *State of the South* calls on the South to develop and implement purposeful policies and systemic practices—which we call an **“infrastructure of opportunity”**—to bolster the prospects for its 15- to 24-year-olds to achieve economic resilience as adults and a fulfilling social and civic life. It is a call to action to the region’s state and local governments, to its educational institutions, to its business and civic leaders, and to its philanthropies and nonprofit organizations to demonstrate social innovation despite gridlock in Washington and in statehouses across the South.

The near-term health of the South’s civil society rests on the urgency with which the region addresses barriers to educational advancement, job creation, and economic mobility. But in addition to removing barriers, the challenge also is to erect an infrastructure of opportunity—that is, **the systems and supports to boost young people to higher rungs on the ladder of economic and personal advancement**. Those systems and supports reach from quality pre-K programs to retraining options for dislocated workers. Our purpose here is to suggest how communities can connect and design the portion of the infrastructure of opportunity that serves youth and young adults.

A true, community-wide infrastructure of opportunity should include a wide range of community leaders, organizations, businesses and institutions: **employers, education systems, community - based organizations, policy makers, civic and neighborhood leaders, philanthropy, and young people themselves**.

In our analysis of the prospects for youth and young adults in the South, guided by national research and regional data, we considered the systems, policies, and practices that need to be in place for economic mobility to grow. In visits to nine communities across the South, we looked not simply for promising programs, but for analysis that acknowledges the particular needs of young people and how local systems address those. Other communities in the South could use a similar frame to look at themselves and make decisions about how to change their policies and practices to strengthen their infrastructure of opportunity. Communities should consider how to:

- **Foster a common strategic vision of aim and outcomes for education and training systems** at the secondary and postsecondary level. They should communicate about and align their curricula, performance measures, and community relationships to devise and promote clear paths for all young people to prepare for, enter, persist in, and complete postsecondary training and credentials that prepare them for good jobs.
- **Engage young people in work experiences** that enhance their learning and training, preparing them to compete in the workforce. Such engagement requires committed involvement of local employers in the design and provision of work-based learning and job experiences.

This alignment is undergirded by policies that move people along the education and employment infrastructure, like an interconnected highway system. Such policies:

- **Support demand-side strategies** in the labor market to stimulate job creation and economic growth, not only with major employers, but also support and promotion of small business development that encourages local entrepreneurs through financing and incubators. This also includes an active role for employers in defining and developing the skills individuals need to be successful in the workforce
- **Reform criminal and juvenile justice practices**, including policing and probation systems, that drastically limit employment opportunities and have a disparate impact on communities of color, particularly young men
- **Expand access to financial supports** that help individuals and families meet basic needs, build financial stability, offer opportunities for saving and wealth creation, and prevent against predatory pay and lending practices
- **Improve job quality**, including family-sustaining wages, flexible work environments and stable scheduling, and quality dependent care

This infrastructure is place-based, **taking advantage of local assets and addressing a community's distinctive challenges** while acknowledging regional and even national policies and pressures that influence local conditions. To be effective and sustainable, it also relies on a community's physical infrastructure. The maintenance and construction of **public works** and utilities present job opportunities for young people; **public transit** connects individuals to school and work and has the potential to reduce isolation of marginalized neighborhoods and populations. There also are policies related to physical infrastructure—like **affordable housing and broadband access**—that, historically and currently, have blocked access to and full participation in the infrastructure of opportunity. Modifying these policies has the potential to reverse or at least mitigate some of the consequences of exclusion.

Aligning and maintaining an infrastructure of opportunity requires pragmatic leadership, and in some cases may require new ways of **organizing partnerships and institutions** to build strong pathways to progress for all young people, both those who are connected to the education and employment systems as well as those who are radically disconnected.

Currently, across the South, there are gaps in workforce preparation along with a job market that doesn't provide enough good jobs. At the same time, the social supports and education systems that undergird the infrastructure of opportunity are facing historic disinvestment. (There are federal and state initiatives that could strengthen this infrastructure, like expanding the availability of low-interest student loans and increasing the minimum wage and other efforts to improve job quality.) Instead of disappearing, **this infrastructure should be as pervasive and reliable as the physical infrastructure of roads and water lines**. It needs to be as integrated and dynamic as any network of power lines and the electric grid to restore what was lost in the Great Recession and to provide a way up for young Southerners with limited prospects for a livelihood.