Affordability is Workforce Development

Priority Actions to Increase Economic Mobility for New York City's Young Adults

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JobsFirstNYC

Table of Contents

About JobsFirstNYC 3

Introduction 4

Recommendation 1: Strengthen and modernize pathways from school to work 5

Recommendation 2: Invest in neighborhoods so young adults can thrive where they live 7

Recommendation 3: Build next-generation work solutions for a changing economy 9

Recommendation 4: Prepare young adults to navigate and shape an AI-driven economy 11

Recommendation 5 : Use youth-centered data and accountability to drive results 13

Conclusion 15

About JobsFirst NYC

JobsFirstNYC creates and advances solutions that break down barriers and transform the systems supporting young adults and their communities in the pursuit of economic opportunities. Our innovative approach to developing new partnership models has helped shape public policy, private philanthropic investments, and the practices of employers, colleges, workforce development service providers, high schools, and others.

Since 2006, JobsFirstNYC has worked with more than 200 organizations and institutions across New York City and State to build effective solutions that connect young adults to economic opportunities.

Introduction

New York City needs a modern, aligned education-training-employment system that works in real time with labor-market and neighborhood conditions to prepare young people for success in a rapidly changing economy. More than 106,000 young adults remain out of school and out of work, and an even greater number are underemployed in unstable, low-wage jobs. These challenges are concentrated in specific neighborhoods that lack coherent, connected systems of education, skills training, and employment.

JobsFirstNYC was created in 2006 to address this challenge. We create and advance solutions that break down barriers and transform the systems supporting young adults and their communities in the pursuit of economic opportunity. Our work involves more than 200 partners across all five boroughs and has connected more than 20,500 people to education, training, and employment. Our place-based solutions—developed in neighborhoods with the highest out-of-school, out-of-work and unemployment rates—have demonstrated that coordinated local systems measurably improve access to education, training, and employment. We have leveraged more than $35 million in public and private investment and supported models that have been adopted and replicated across schools, workforce programs, and city agencies.

Through our Community, Education, Work, and Policy Solutions, JobsFirst NYC has validated a set of practices that improve young people's transitions into postsecondary education, align training with employer needs, strengthen coordination at the neighborhood level, and support young adults in accessing upwardly mobile work. The recommendations below outline the next steps the City can take to build a more unified and responsive system.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen and modernize pathways from school to work.

Young adults need clear and structured pathways that connect high school, community-based programs, colleges, and skills training. Today, these pathways remain fragmented. JobsFirstNYC's work shows that when these pathways are aligned and coordinated across institutions, young adults move more successfully into postsecondary opportunities and employment.

Public institutions such as New York City high schools, high school equivalency programs, and the CUNY system have the potential to propel tens of thousands of graduates into the middle class each year. Yet research confirms persistent disparities: a student's neighborhood and school strongly predict the opportunities they receive and the outcomes they achieve. It doesn't have to be this way. Since launching partnerships with CUNY in 2010 and the Department of Education in 2017, JobsFirstNYC has contributed to systemic changes that have removed barriers for students at CUNY community colleges and expanded career exploration, career development, and work-based learning at the high school level.

By modernizing pathways between school, training, and work-and by integrating workforce development, hands-on learning, and employer connections into the school and skills training experience—New York can ensure that all young adults are equipped with the skills, experience, and networks needed to succeed.

Recommended actions:

1. Universalize career exploration and work-based learning
Today, far too few students in the City's public schools and CUNY have access to career-connected learning. While we applaud the emergent work that NYC Public Schools (NYCPS), CUNY, and the Department of Youth and Community Development have done in this space, greater investment is needed to universalize work-based learning and expand paid internships, apprenticeship opportunities, and structured workplace experiences that connect directly to postsecondary education, skills training, and career progression.

2. Strengthen CBO-college partnerships through structured dual-enrollment pathways

Create consistent, City-supported models where community-based organizations (CBOs) partner with colleges and advanced training providers to offer early exposure to credit-bearing coursework, clearer advancement routes, and smoother transitions into higher-skill training. Dual-enrollment structures can serve as a backbone for longer on-ramps that integrate foundational skills, sector preparation, and college-linked progression.

3. Scale advanced career development across the education system

Every year, tens of thousands of students in traditional high schools and high school equivalency programs are locked out of opportunities for career development because their school has no such offerings. Career and technical education schools and programs are a strong foundation; FutureReadyNYC is on the right path. CUNY Beyond is promising. But much more is needed.

4. Move from employer insight to workplace opportunities as a core driver of school-to-career strategy

JobsFirst NYC was honored to partner with NYCPS to engage deeply with their Industry Commissions. This engagement led to a report that identified a variety of ways the Industry Commissions could more effectively leverage employers. The key takeaway: convert employer insights into workplace experiences. Doing so helps schools identify—and students learn—the key skills, knowledge, and competencies required to pursue a career in a rapidly evolving economy.

Recommendation 2: Invest in neighborhoods so young adults can thrive where they live.

All young adults deserve to live in communities with strong education and training options, accessible work opportunities, and a vibrant civic life—yet far too many New Yorkers do not. In fact, as JobsFirst NYC has recently shown, more than 106,000 young adults are neither in school nor working; this population is heavily concentrated in neighborhoods that have faced years of disinvestment. A coordinated, place-based mobility strategy is essential to reversing these inequities.

Leading research from economists such as Raj Chetty and summary research published by the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty show that neighborhood-level investments improve long-term outcomes when they strengthen schools, workforce pipelines, transportation access, and access to family-sustaining jobs. Here in New York City, JobsFirst NYC has been a major force in advancing place-based initiatives since launching our community-based work in 2006. We have supported the development of partnerships in Brownsville, Brooklyn; East Harlem & Mott Haven; the Northwest Bronx; the Lower East Side; Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn; and the North Shore of Staten Island. Across these partnerships, JobsFirst NYC has demonstrated that a place-based strategy can drive employment, workforce development, and economic development.

Recommended actions:

1. Develop a unified place-based strategy for New York City
The City should build on proven neighborhood-based models by adopting a unified place-based economic mobility strategy. JobsFirstNYC's Brownsville Hub Cooperative helped inform the City's Blueprint for Community Safety, and our place-based and sector partnerships influenced the New York City Economic Development Corporation's Economic Mobility Networks. A coordinated citywide framework would create consistent standards and shared strategies while allowing for flexibility and supporting community-driven economic development, education, employment, training, and economic mobility goals.

2. Prioritize under-resourced neighborhoods
Use data on unemployment and on out-of-school, out-of-work youth to determine where systemic intervention is most needed. For example, recent data from the American Community Survey show that there are six neighborhoods with alarmingly high rates of 16- to 24-year-olds who are neither working nor in school. These neighborhoods deserve the City's full attention.

3. Support community-led hubs that organize partners and resources
Strengthen hubs that coordinate education, training, employment, youth development, and economic initiatives by building the capacity of local partners that sustain these efforts.

4. Integrate employer demand and youth voice into neighborhood strategies
Ground neighborhood strategies in real employer demand and strong employer partnerships. Employers should help shape training, validate skills, and support clear pathways into in-demand roles. Youth voice should guide priorities so that training reflects young people's interests and strengthens trust in neighborhood systems.

Recommendation 3: Build next-generation work solutions for a changinng New York City economy.

Sectoral employment approaches align training with the needs of high-growth industries, creating clear pathways into stable jobs and improving outcomes for young adults. But the next phase requires deeper coordination among CBOs, colleges, employers, and training providers, along with training systems that can keep pace with a fast-changing labor market.

JobsFirst NYC's Young Adult Sectoral Employment Project —the nation's first youth-centered sectoral employment initiative—offers a tested blueprint: employer-led, industry-aligned training grounded in positive youth development. When expanded into strong sector networks and paired with stackable, "earn-and-learn" pathways, these approaches boost employment and earnings and help ensure that young adults who are out of school and out of work are first in line for growth in industries like tech, healthcare, and the green economy. Together, these networks do more than connect training to jobs, they create a citywide ecosystem that increases access to economic mobility.

Recommended actions:

1. Build training models that strengthen durable skills and use modern systems to track shifting labor-market needs

Develop training that builds durable, transferable skills valued across occupations and sectors. In parallel, modernize workforce systems so they can continuously update changing functional and technical skill requirements using real-time labor-market intelligence, predictive analytics on job taxonomy shifts, and employer-informed feedback loops.

2. Support universal childcare and pre-K as essential workforce infrastructure
Expand access to affordable childcare and pre-K so parents and caregivers can participate fully in education, training, and employment. Treat childcare as core infrastructure for any effective workforce pathway

3. Strengthen coordination among CBOS, K-12 schools, colleges, and employers through a dual-track approach
Use a dual-track strategy that supports both immediate employment pathways and longer on-ramps into advanced training and higher education, including earn-and-learn models. As an early priority, the City should establish a standard coordination framework and pilot it in select neighborhoods so programs can connect short-term training
to longer-term advancement routes.

4. Build an employer-workforce strategy that positions talent as core to economic development
The City should replace ad hoc employer partnerships with a coordinated strategy that links talent development to economic development, using tools such as shared employer role standards, local-hire approaches, and targeted incentives that encourage employers to create clear entry-level pathways and advancement opportunities.

5. Prioritize neighborhoods with the highest unemployment rates
Ensure that training and hiring strategies are industry-driven and reach neighborhoods with the highest barriers. Local impact sourcing is a strong example of this approach, bringing digital skills centers and tech-focused jobs directly to under-resourced neighborhoods while building local recruitment pipelines and supporting long-term community economic resilience.

See Appendix 1: Local Impact Sourcing, New York City for a detailed proposed strategy.

Recommendation 4: Prepare young adults to navigate and shape an AI-driven economy.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and automation continue to reshape New York City's labor market. Traditional entry-level roles are shrinking—postings have fallen by up to 50% in some sectors since 2023—while employers are rapidly increasing expectations for digital fluency, communication, adaptability, and problem-solving. To keep pace with this shift, New York City must ensure that its education, workforce, and community systems are preparing young adults for the roles that are emerging rather than those that are disappearing.

JobsFirstNYC is already supporting the workforce ecosystem in meeting this challenge through AI-centered initiatives and convenings. Building on research with partners, we collaborated with the Workforce Professionals Training Institute and the NYC Employment and Training Coalition to develop fieldwide AI guidelines. And through early explorations of how AI can accelerate impact, such as our Skills Mapping initiative, JobsFirst NYC continues to lead in understanding both the future of work and how New Yorkers can best be served. By integrating these insights into programs, curricula, and training strategies, the incoming administration can equip young New Yorkers for emerging roles, build a more resilient workforce, and ensure that young adults are positioned not merely to react to technological change but to shape and thrive in the City's evolving economy.

Recommended actions:

1. Conduct a citywide analysis of how AI is reshaping early-career roles
Commission new research—and leverage existing research—to identify which entry-level jobs are declining, which are being reshaped, and which are emerging across high-growth sectors. Use this analysis to guide City planning, occupational standards, and program investments.

2. Modernize digital and AI skill development across education and workforce systems
Integrate digital literacy, foundational technology skills, and responsible AI use across NYCPS, CUNY, community-based programs, and publicly funded workforce training. Ensure alignment with employer-validated competencies and create clear pathways from learning environments into in-demand roles. Invest in templates, toolkits, and technical assistance that help mission-driven organizations integrate technology in ways that strengthen—not replace—human-centered practice and ensure equitable access.

3. Establish citywide standards for the responsible use of AI in education, training, and hiring
Develop guidance and implementation standards that ensure transparency, data privacy, equity protections, and safeguards against algorithmic bias. Require all City-funded programs and vendors to adhere to these standards.

4. Increase access to work-based learning that reflects the future of work
Partner with employers to create internships, apprenticeships, and project-based learning experiences where young adults can apply digital, technical, and problem-solving skills in real-world settings shaped by new technologies.

5. Engage young adults as co-designers in all AI-related public initiatives
Research consistently shows the value of human-centered design. Young adults' perspectives must inform AI strategies, as they are the ones who will live and work in this new economy. Compensate young adults for participating in design sessions, testing new tools, and advising the City on responsible AI integration. Adopt a human-centered design approach that reflects the needs and experiences of young New Yorkers, particularly those from communities most affected by technological disruption.

Recommendation 5: Use youth-centered data and accountability to drive results.

New York City cannot improve outcomes for young adults if it does not consistently track how they enter, move through, and advance in the labor market. Although the City collects extensive data, this information is rarely organized around young adults' experiences, disaggregated to expose inequities, or used to inform planning and investments. A youth-centered data and accountability strategy is necessary to identify persistent barriers and ensure that public dollars lead to better outcomes.

Recent JobsFirst NYC's analyses show that headline improvements often mask serious challenges for young adults. Unemployment, underemployment, and labor force withdrawal remain concentrated in specific neighborhoods, and many young New Yorkers are clustered in low-wage, unstable work. At the same time, City planning strategies and major economic development efforts rarely treat young adults as a distinct group with specific needs, such as longer on-ramps for career exploration, improved literacy and numeracy, and stronger wraparound supports. If the City expects better results, it must collect the right youth-specific data, share these data transparently, and use them to drive policy, funding, and program decisions.

Recommended actions:

1. Mandate annual reporting on youth labor-market intelligence
Partner with youth-centered intermediaries and research organizations to develop annual, publicly available reporting on key youth labor-market indicators, including employment, unemployment, underemployment, wages, sector of employment, and participation in education and training. Data should be disaggregated by age, race, gender, borough, and neighborhood so that policymakers, providers, and communities can see where progress is occurring and where gaps persist.

2. Embed youth employment outcomes in City economic and workforce plans
Make youth outcomes a core component of citywide economic development, workforce, and education planning. Require agencies to set goals and track progress using a shared set of youth indicators, such as sustained employment, wage growth, successful transitions from education and training into work, participation in career exploration, and access to wraparound supports. Use these indicators to guide funding decisions and to assess whether major initiatives are improving conditions for young adults specifically—not just for the City's population as a whole.

3. Fund long-term research and tracking on youth economic mobility
Invest in ongoing research that follows young adults over time to understand how public investments in education, training, housing, and workforce programs affect long-term economic mobility. Support partnerships between the City, researchers, and intermediaries to analyze trends, to identify which models produce real gains for young adults, and to make those findings available to agencies and providers. Use this evidence to refine strategies, retire approaches that are not working, and scale the practices that have the strongest impact.

4. Build a longitudinal data system spanning pre-K through employment
New York City lacks the ability to understand the ways in which high schools and colleges propel young adults into the workforce. By building a longitudinal database that links the outcomes of students to educational institutions, New York City can understand which institutions are particularly strong in promoting young adults' economic mobility and which require additional support.

5. Prioritize youth voice in data collection and interpretation
Use existing youth leadership structures to ensure that young adults help identify which outcomes should be measured and how findings are understood. The Mayor's Youth Leadership Council and the NYC Youth Council can play an important role in shaping priorities, strengthening trust, and ensuring that data reflect young people's experiences and interests.

Conclusion

New York City has an opportunity to build a unified system that connects education, training, and employment in ways that expand economic mobility for young adults and strengthen the neighborhoods where they live. A system that responds to real labor-market conditions, supports skill development, and removes barriers to work is central to the City's broader affordability goals. Affordability is workforce development: when young adults can access stable employment and advance in their careers, they are better able to build long-term stability. JobsFirstNYC stands ready to support the transition team with further detail on any of these recommendations.

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