

## The 13th Grade: A Career Pathways Solution

Written by Scott Gray, President/CEO  
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Growing numbers of Twin Cities young adults are not prepared for the modern workforce and ill-prepared relative to mastery of basic skills; they lack a defined career path, and do not possess the range of skills that employers require. For far too many of these young adults, in the absence of a career and life plan, mentoring and coaching, they succumb to the lure of the streets and become sucked into the pipeline to prison. We have seen these young people in our communities and in our families. This is my wife's younger brother, this is my young cousin, this is the young brother hanging at the corner store, these are the young men and women we care about who need a pathway to success.

The report, *Are They Really Ready To Work?* found that there are frightening numbers of young adults 18-26, particularly those with just a high school diploma or GED, who lack the skills they need to excel in today's workplace.

A solution offered by the Minneapolis Urban League is a program we call "The 13th Grade." The 13th Grade is a twelve month non-residential college readiness and career pathways employability program focused on the academic, technical, and soft skill (competency areas) building of disconnected young adults who are unemployed or underemployed, not enrolled in a postsecondary institution, and who have no defined career pathway. Through "The 13th Grade" and its integrated program elements, completers will be both prepared and qualified for employment that pays a livable wage.

When I think of the typical student who attends the Minneapolis Urban League Academy, or the growing numbers of disconnected young adults scattered across the Twin Cities, I know that the Armed Forces or a middle skill factory job is no longer their ticket to employment. With a job seeker pool flooded with college graduates, a host of disappearing industries and changes in jobs due to globalization and technological advancement, the prospects of a bright future for 'generation next' is bleak without an intentional intervention.

For instance, take TM, an 18 year old, who in a few months will be 19. The student came to the Minneapolis Urban League Academy with enough credits to enter the 11th grade, but with limited motivation and no vocational concept for a future work life. With academic coaching and support services provided by school staff, she has become motivated, is applying herself in the classroom, and the 13th Grade program could help her graduate and create a lifelong career pathway for herself. For this student, the 13th Grade can offer an opportunity for credit recovery, diploma requirement completion, as well as time for social and cognitive maturity. The 13th Grade will serve to equip countless other young adults who have not successfully "launched" to discover and create a career, while progressing to become contributing members of this community.

Left unchecked, the increasing numbers of disconnected young adults in the Twin Cities, across our state, and sadly across this nation is a threat to local and national economic vibrancy and global competitiveness. The 13th Grade, through a bundling of best practices, navigational supportive services and technical upskilling provided in collaboration with MUL partners, can start to turn the tide.

Former Congressman Steve Gunderson in the book *The Jobs Revolution: Changing How*

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*America Works*, predicated the events of today over nine years ago. The book, which was co-written with Assistant Labor Secretary Robert Jones who served under Presidents Reagan and Bush, states "Minorities and youth are the people we must reach, motivate, equip and continuously educate. They are our hope for a competitive workforce. What we lack is not knowledge...but adequate national leadership and the will to act on what we know."

The MUL's 13th Grade initiative, co-sponsored and presented by Senator Jeff Hayden (D-SD62) has been adopted by the Minnesota Senate and was unanimously adopted by the Senate Education Committee. Senator Bobby Champion (D-SD 59) and Representative Ray Dehn (D-HD 59b) co-sponsored the measure which could potentially impact over 3,000 young adults ages 18-26, placing them on college and career pathways by 2015.

We all see this quiet storm brewing in our midst, so now the question is will we choose to act.