Young people have been hit harder by unemployment than any other age group in the current recession. Unemployment among 16- to 24-year-olds has doubled over the past decade, with low-income, minority teens especially hard hit. For decades, efforts have been made to reform K-12 education, promote college enrollment, and enhance work-based learning. Yet academic achievement and college graduation rates have failed to improve. Many U.S. employers still complain that today’s young adults do not have what it takes to succeed in the 21st century labor market. This report presents cutting-edge research on the most effective, evidence-based strategies for preparing our youth for success in the workforce. Two approaches in particular offer some of the strongest evidence for improving the life prospects of youth—early childhood education and Career Academies for making high school more engaging and career-relevant. Working together, youth, families, schools, employers, and policymakers can ensure that today’s generation of youth do not get left behind in the global economy.

**William Symonds**

In the first chapter of this report, William Symonds from the Pathways to Prosperity Project at Harvard University provides an overview of the factors that influence youth workforce success and strategies states are using to create more and better career pathways for students. The United States is no longer a global leader in education. Many of our youth are not developing the skills they need to prosper in the 21st century economy. Unless we equip youth with the education and workforce skills they need to succeed, we are in danger of leaving millions of young people on the sidelines, severely jeopardizing our nation’s ability to remain competitive in a global economy. Harvard’s 2011 Pathways to Prosperity report challenges the prevalent mentality that a four-year college degree is the best path for all students, and argues instead that we need to create multiple pathways for youth to succeed. These pathways must combine rigorous academics with strong career/technical education and work-based learning that provide the skills and credentials youth need in today’s changing labor market. All this will involve intensive collaboration between youth, families, schools, employers, and policymakers. Multiple local, state, and national initiatives are described that hold promise for improving economic and life outcomes for struggling youth.

**James Kemple**

The second chapter of this report by Dr. James Kemple of New York University describes Career Academies, one of the best-studied and most successful models for helping youth transition into work and family life. Over the last 40 years, Career Academies have become a widely used high school reform that aims to keep students engaged in school and prepares them for successful transitions to postsecondary education and employment. Career Academies are organized as small learning communities within high schools that combine academic and technical curricula around a career theme. They also work with local employers to provide career-based learning opportunities. Since 1993, MDRC has been conducting a rigorous evaluation of the Career Academy approach in a diverse group of nine high schools across the United States. Career Academies have been shown to improve labor market outcomes, especially for young men. Eight years after scheduled graduation, young men in Career Academies had earned an average total of nearly $30,000 more than their peers. In addition, young men in Career Academies were more likely to be married, to be custodial parents, and to be living independently with their children.

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Where research meets family policy

The Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars are a continuing series of policy forums that provide policymakers with objective, high-quality research on issues such as jobs, evidence-based budgeting, growing the state economy, cost-effective corrections programs, long-term care, prisoner reentry, health care quality and cost, and workforce development. The Seminars aim to build greater use of and respect for evidence in policymaking, encourage policymakers to examine policies and programs through a family impact and a racial equity lens, and provide opportunities for policymakers to develop relationships across party lines and build common ground. Check out our website (www.familyimpactseminars.org) for audio and video of speakers at previous seminars (click on “State Seminars”), and for briefing reports and other resources written specifically for state policymakers attending over 170 Family Impact Seminars convened by 24 different states (click on “Publications”). The briefing report described here, “Preparing Wisconsin’s Youth for Success in the Workforce” accompanied the 31st Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar. The full report, edited by Olivia Little, Interim Associate Director, Stephanie Eddy, Consultant, and Karen Bogenschneider, Director, can also be downloaded from our website. Hard copies are available to state legislators at no charge by contacting Seminar Coordinator, Jennifer Seubert, at (608) 263-2353 or jseubert@wisc.edu.