by David Jason Fischer
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New York City recently concluded its Summer Youth Employment Program , a highly regarded city-run initiative that placed more than 41,000 New Yorkers ages 14 to 21 into publicly subsidized temporary jobs this summer. Young people participating in the program worked for employers from major corporations like JP Morgan Chase to local libraries and day camps. The experience provided structure to their summer, helped them earn spending money and gave them an invaluable introduction to the world of work that, according to leading workforce experts, will greatly improve their chances of success later on in life.

Unfortunately, the program serves only a fraction of the young people who could benefit from it. While the number of job openings remained virtually stagnant from 2006 to 2007, applications jumped from about 72,000 to over 93,000. In other words, the city had to turn away more than 50,000 youngsters from across the five boroughs who applied for the program this summer. Overall, the Summer Youth Employment Program now serves 20 percent fewer participants than it did in 1999, when the federal government provided funding for it.

## The Value of Work

The gaps in summer program are particularly troubling because teenagers here face the most challenging labor market in the country. New York has the lowest teen employment rate of any of the nation's 20 largest cities, with fewer than 16 teens per hundred employed—less than half the nationwide rate. Labor market experts speculate that the city's large number of immigrants compete with teens for entry-level jobs, explaining the dismal figure. Even worse, the likelihood of finding a job drops with family income: In 2005, teenagers from families earning less than $20,000 per year had less than half the work participation rate (9.9 percent) as their counterparts from families making more than $80,000 annually (20.6 percent). In other words, the kids who could most benefit from jobs are the least likely to get them.

Having a summer job undoubtedly gives city teens a leg up. In economic researchers Andrew Sum, Neeta Fogg and Garth Mangum found that the benefits of early employment are considerable and lasting -- particularly for young people who do not plan to attend college immediately. Those benefits include a smoother transition to the labor market and higher weekly and yearly earnings for up to 15 years after graduating high school. Early participation in the labor market is among the strongest indicators of sustained employment and higher earnings later on in life. There is even some evidence that suggests young people who work are less likely to drop out of high school than those who don't have jobs.

## Funding Cuts

As the Center for an Urban Future reported in June, the Summer Youth Employment Program can't serve more young New Yorkers largely because federal funding has all but disappeared over the last decade. In 1999, Washington provided the program with over $42 million. That figure fell to less than $5 million this year. The Bloomberg administration has admirably stepped into the breach, devoting $32.5 million in city funds toward summer jobs this year. And the city's Department of Youth and Community Development has generally earned high marks for its management of the program. But city resources alone cannot be sufficient to provide a summer job to every kid who wants one—which should be the goal.

Before next summer, the city's congressional delegation should push for a renewed federal commitment to summer youth programs in New York and elsewhere. At the same time, the city's business community, which has a clear interest in ensuring the workforce of tomorrow will be well prepared, needs to become more involved in the program. While individual employers and certain sectors have invested time and effort in strengthening youth employment, far too few have made it a priority.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg should make a direct appeal to his former private-sector compatriots to take placements for the Summer Youth Employment Program and related programs, notably CAPITAL (Corporate Allies Program for Internships, Training and Leadership). Launched in 2006 as a "next step" for successful former participants in the summer youth program, who are deemed ready for more demanding work with business employers, CAPITAL expanded from 50

placements in its first year to a still-modest 82 in 2007. Given the size and scope of the city's business community, the program very easily could accommodate 10 times that number by next year.

With so much to gain for the youngsters themselves and so much at stake for New York City's economy, federal officials and local business leaders need to take action now to ensure that next year more than 50,000 New York City teens who want to work are not left idle.

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