"What do you do?" is often the first question we ask on meeting people. For many of today's youth in the United States, the answer may be little more than an awkward unemployed silence as they face the risks of life in poverty, finding themselves increasingly lost in the transition between school and the job market, eager to do something meaningful but lacking skills or opportunity. What would make the difference, to help youth stay in school, gain job skills, and enjoy well-being as adults? The key, says Harvard Graduate School of Education Emeritus Professor Robert B. Schwartz, is in "crosswalk" solutions that can connect education with work-based learning. Schwartz spoke on February 25 as part of an "Informal Conversation" event, a roundtable discussion series hosted by the Harvard Global Health Institute (HGHI) to offer faculty and students the opportunity to engage in dialogue on cutting-edge, cross-disciplinary issues. Past speakers have included Yale Professor Thomas Pogge, UNAIDS Founding Director Peter Piot, Sophie Delaunay of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), HSPH Malaria Scholar-in-Residence Regina Rabinovich, economist William Hsiao, and Harvard Divinity School Professor Ahmed Ragab, and human rights lawyer, Jacqueline Bhabha.

The numbers are bleak: One in four American children grow up in poverty, often due to a generational legacy of poor education and limited opportunities. Those who drop out in high school often do so because they get bored, lost in the system and feel that no one seems to care. Overworked school guidance counselors may focus on college-bound students who proactively seek their help. Yet by age 25, only about half of young Americans have a postsecondary degree or certificate. And racial disparities in employment trends are even more shocking. The chance that a black high school graduate from the class of 2012, actively looking for a full-time job, will find one, says Schwartz, is five percent. Yet in countries like Switzerland, where apprenticeship opportunities are streamlined early into formal education in adolescence, five percent is the youth unemployment rate. Is something wrong with education in the United States?
Schwartz, a co-author of *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century*, which documents these statistics, trends, and related research, described several existing models that suggest hope for change. It is vital, he says, to connect life and career options, starting the conversation with youth as early as the middle grades, and building policies and programs that can make choices possible. His observations drew on his long experience in the field. Following years as a teacher, school principal, and then education advisor to the Mayor of Boston during the 1970s, Schwartz worked in Washington, D.C., to develop community connections for youth under the Carter Administration. He returned to Boston in 1981 to help create Boston Compact, a partnership between schools and the city’s business community that improved the education system by giving youth access to jobs and job training. The Compact was led by the *Boston Private Industry Council* (PIC), a non-profit currently chaired by Partners HealthCare CEO, Dr. Gary Gottlieb. The PIC connects over 3000 youth each year with summer jobs and school-year internships. Other training examples that help youth who stay in school to build skills for a lifetime career include “full-service” schools that engage health care services as well as family and community participation, and the “early college high school” initiative. An accelerated learning model, the early college initiative targets low-income and minority youth, provides up to two years of free college credit, and shows, says Schwartz, “spectacular success.”

Schwartz and colleagues at *Jobs for the Future*, a Boston–based national non-profit, established the *Pathways to Prosperity Network* in 2012 and are currently working with eight states to help them “build out” career pathways that seamlessly connect secondary schools and two–year postsecondary institutions to serve young people who seek marketable skills in high–demand fields such as health care, information technology, and advanced manufacturing.

Schwartz’s comments raised many questions during the Institute's February roundtable. Conversation focused on the importance of mentoring relationships in making successful transitions, as well as insights learned from other country models. Judith Helzner, a Visiting Scientist at HSPH and Special Advisor to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, who was present at the roundtable session, described some of the lessons learned from a review (done by the International Women’s Health Coalition) of the sexuality education curricula that the Foundation has supported in Nigeria. The program showed that engaging students in discussion on personal topics builds their sense of connectedness to teachers and to school – especially important in helping to keep girls in school. Dr. Rebecca Hope, a pediatrician from the UK who is also currently at HSPH, spoke of the “poverty of expectations” that too often affects youth expectations. For example, she said, some parents were talking about careers with their children as early as primary school, but she knew that “in other homes that does not happen; one–quarter of the girls in my class dropped out before age 16,” she recalls. A graduate student who grew up in Iran recalled the weekly mandatory volunteer work his school required to help students build work– and community–related skills. Indeed, Schwartz and his research colleagues have learned from systems in several other countries, including Switzerland, where apprenticeships are the norm, with 70 percent of youth choosing “applied learning” pathways at age 15. Through informal coaching and support as well as formal training, employers have a big impact on youth self–agency and development. Even without public subsidies, he noted of the Swiss model,
"there are crosswalks at every step."

"This isn’t just about getting kids from school to work,” Schwartz emphasized. “It’s really about getting kids through the adolescent period into adulthood.” First jobs typically build those "soft" core accountability skills that employers value: reliability, professionalism, an understanding of appropriate workplace dress and language, teamwork, and the ability to take both supervision and initiative. Youth need the structures that can enable welcome challenges and choices. While investments in early childhood are very important, he concluded, “We need powerful interventions at every stage of a young person’s development.”

Photo by Christen Reardon