



Preventing Failure to Launch: Creating More School-to-Work Pathways for Young Adults

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INTRODUCTION

Today's high school students and young adults face a difficult job market. The Covid pandemic has been particularly hard on less educated workers without a college degree. The 10 million jobs lost by Americans at the pandemic's onset disproportionately impacted young adults between the ages of 16 and 24, and especially Black and Hispanic workers.¹ Some estimate that as many as 25 percent of our youth will neither be in school nor working when the pandemic ends.²

Research shows that employers are less likely to hire workers with little to no experience for the “first jobs” that many younger workers rely on to build their skills and credentials. Without those first jobs, many will face fewer paths to enter the workforce. To help the non-college-bound, our education system needs to create alternative pathways to careers.

The Biden administration and Congress have the opportunity to create a revamped system that addresses inequality by building continuous pathways between high school and work. As part of his [Build Back Better plan](#), President Biden has called for grants to states to accelerate students' attainment of quality credentials, degrees, and opportunities in job training programs. As we discuss in this paper, there are promising existing models to draw on in thinking about how to provide more job opportunities to young adults.³

**KEY THEME 01:
WORK-BASED LEARNING**

The importance of work-based learning that connects students to employers.

Case studies:

The Centers for Applied Science & Technology (CAST)

Linked Learning

**KEY THEME 02:
SOFT SKILLS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL**

Curriculums that emphasize soft skills and social capital to prepare young adults for their first jobs.

Case studies:

Youthforce NOLA

**KEY THEME 03:
SUPPORTIVE OR WRAPAROUND SERVICES**

The need for supportive or wraparound services to help students get across the finish line.

Case studies:

Urban Alliance

Harlem Children's Zone

**KEY THEME 04:
EARNING CREDITS TOWARDS
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

High schools that help students earn credits toward postsecondary education along the way to graduation.

Case studies:

P-TECH schools

This paper reviews several case studies to provide evidence-based examples of how to better connect students to careers. We first address the **need for broad-based pathways to careers** and then focus on four key themes across school-to-career models, including: (1) the importance of **work-based learning** that connects students to employers; (2) curriculums

that emphasize **soft skills and social capital** to prepare young adults for their first jobs; (3) the need for **supportive or wraparound services** to help students get across the finish line; and, (4) high schools that help students **earn credits toward postsecondary education** along the way to graduation.

THE NEED FOR BROAD-BASED PATHWAYS TO CAREERS

First jobs and credentials set the tone for young adults in terms of their early career success and future mobility in the labor market. Early wages can impact career-long earnings and economic mobility, as wealth and skills accrue over a lifetime. [Research](#) shows that young adults graduating high school and college during the Great Recession will bear economic scars for the rest of their lives, and there is already [evidence](#) that households under 35 have less wealth in both absolute and relative terms than previous generations.^{4,5} The pandemic may hit young people even harder, increasing the need for broad-based career pathways.

While many young adults [sit out poor labor markets](#) by enrolling in postsecondary education, a [significant portion of Americans](#) do not go to college or earn a traditional four-year degree. Among recent high school graduates ages 16 to 24, [30 percent](#) do not enroll in any postsecondary education, and millions of these young adults are left disconnected from the labor force.^{6,7} College enrollment is even lower for Black and Hispanic high school graduates—[50 and 37 percent respectively](#)—and this disparity only exacerbates social inequities for minority communities.⁸ Even among those who do enroll at the postsecondary level, only [60 percent](#) of students in two- or four-year programs graduate within six years.⁹

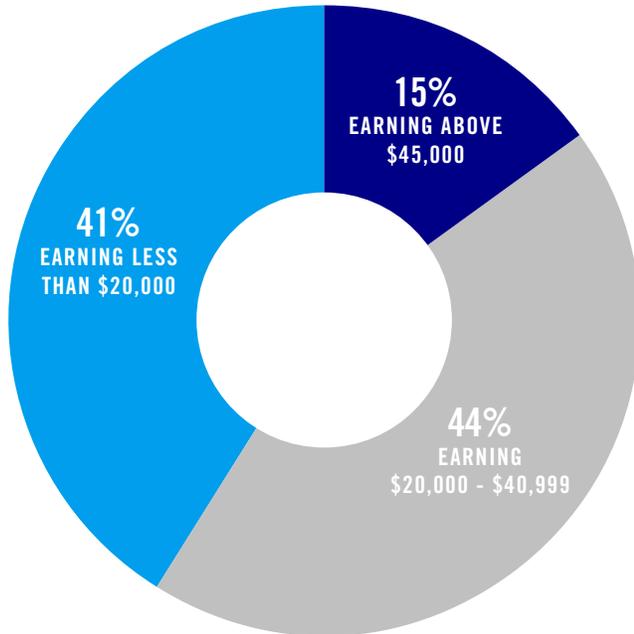
Many young or low-wage workers in a first or entry-level job lack the credentials – college degrees or training certificates -- they need to advance to higher paid jobs. As they bounce from one low-wage job to another, they are seldom given the opportunity to acquire technical skills or demonstrate the “soft skills”

(such as time management and problem solving) that employers prize. Work-focused schools and programs give students the opportunity to graduate with a resume that signals valuable work experience and skills to employers. Programs that focus on sectoral training in high-demand industries, such as IT and healthcare, are especially effective at preparing high school students for careers after graduation. These provide participants with credentials that are readily transferable between different employers in the same industry.

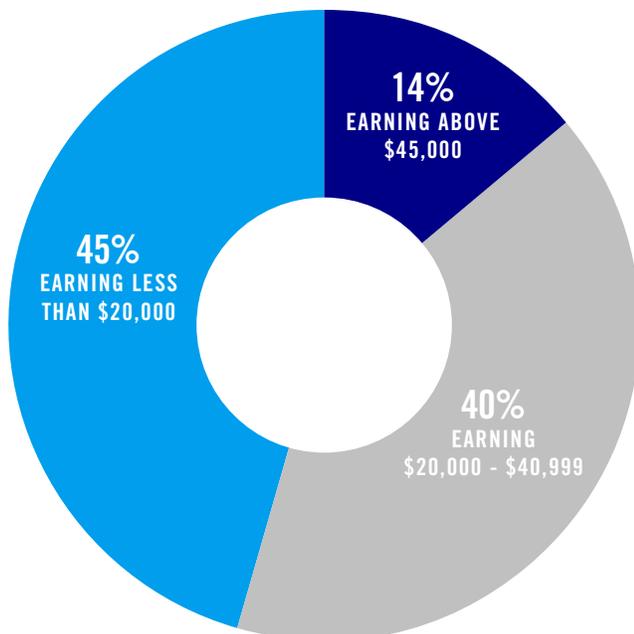
Access to well-paying careers is a vital equity issue for women, lower-income, and minority workers. Young Black and Hispanic workers experience [higher rates of unemployment](#) relative to their white counterparts and are more likely to get stuck in lower-paying industries and positions.¹⁰ In 2019, [nearly a quarter](#) of households with a female breadwinner lived in poverty. In households headed by Black or Hispanic women, that figure was closer to 30 percent.¹¹ Women also make up the [majority of minimum-wage workers](#) and, [according to](#) the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “Black people were more likely to hold minimum wage jobs than people of other races and ethnicities.”^{12,13}

Promising new models and strategies are springing up across the country to help students begin preparing for “first jobs,” as early as middle school. Many of them are developing a robust pipeline of employment for the next generation. [According to](#) the U.S. Department of Education, high school students enrolled in programs with a career and technical education (“CTE”) concentration are more likely to both graduate and earn to higher median annual salaries than those who did not participate:¹⁴

HIGH SCHOOL CTE CONCENTRATORS BY EMPLOYMENT EARNINGS EIGHT YEARS AFTER EXPECTED HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION



HIGH SCHOOL NON-CTE CONCENTRATORS BY EMPLOYMENT EARNINGS EIGHT YEARS AFTER EXPECTED HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION



Source: U.S. Department of Education

The lesson from these novel approaches is that connecting students to work *before* they graduate high school is key to their labor market success.

Investing in young workers has [high economic returns](#), and such investments should include creating multiple pathways outside of college for the millions who do not enroll or complete a postsecondary education.¹⁵ While the purpose of a high school education goes far beyond just preparing students for jobs, in that it also should prepare them well for civic, social, community, and political life as adult members of our society, enabling young people to succeed in the work force is also a key goal of the school system.

**KEY THEME 01:
WORK-BASED LEARNING**

The importance of work-based learning that connects students to employers.

Case studies:

The Centers for Applied Science & Technology (CAST)

Linked Learning

LEARNING THROUGH WORK CONNECTS STUDENTS TO CAREERS

All students benefit when they can understand how their education leads to jobs and careers as they transition to adulthood. A number of schools and programs exist across the country that make work-based learning a part of the curriculum. These prepare high-school students with paid internships or work shadowing that expose them to professional environments and various types of employers and careers.

Case Study:

The [Centers for Applied Science & Technology \(CAST\)](#), a network of charter schools in Texas, is pioneering a new model for integrated schoolwork and work-based learning.¹⁶ CAST schools are tuition-free, career-themed high schools in the San Antonio region. Students are placed in internships, job shadowing, and/or mentorship opportunities with major local companies, such as Toyota, to get on the job experience. These opportunities center around high-demand, high-wage industries to give students promising options for employment once they graduate. This model builds students' resumes, expands their professional networks, and better prepares them for life beyond the walls of their CAST school.

A [student](#) in a CAST internship said a major benefit from hands-on experience is that “the more you try, the more you learn about what you like and what you don’t like. When you find what you really like, it’s great.”¹⁷

Case Study:

[Linked Learning](#) combines college preparation with career-based training.¹⁸ Launched in California, it has expanded to other sites around the country. While studying college-entry coursework (rigorous academics aligned with university admission requirements), high school students also work in a local industry to gain career skills and experience. Internships, job shadowing, apprenticeships, and more help students connect their education with real-world applications and opportunities. As a result, they leave school with workplace readiness, college preparation, self-management skills, and academic success. A nine-year evaluation of the initiative, conducted by [SRI International](#), found that Linked Learning students were more likely to graduate, earn more high school credits, and

enroll in a four-year college than their peers.¹⁹ Students of color saw even higher success rates, helping to close the achievement gap in their districts.

A [graduate of a Los Angeles Linked Learning program](#), who is interested in media, underscored the excitement of having direct, hands-on experience.²⁰ “Normally you wouldn’t have students handling expensive equipment,” he said, “but they really trusted us with that. It was neat to be able to use professional programs, professional cameras, and get a foot in the door with just using skills that professionals use.”

Work-based programs connect lessons learned in the classroom with real-world application and practice. Additionally, mentorships and networking connections give students opportunities to get to know role models and connect with potential employers. This is a win-win for students and local companies: the former get experience and exposure to jobs, while the latter can get a head start on recruitment.

KEY THEME 02: SOFT SKILLS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Curriculums that emphasize soft skills and social capital to prepare young adults for their first jobs.

Case studies:

Youthforce NOLA

GAINING VALUABLE SOFT SKILLS AND BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Soft skills such as punctuality, communication, problem solving, and time management are especially valuable to employers and often

lacking in young workers or first-time job seekers. These are difficult to learn without hands-on experience.

Case Study:

[Youthforce NOLA](#) partners with schools to increase opportunity for students across New Orleans.²¹ The organization fosters relationships with employers in high-wage industries to expose students to different career pathways by placing them in paid internships, where they can earn industry-recognized credentials. It provides soft skills training that emphasizes communication, collaboration, social awareness, problem solving, among other skills. YouthForce NOLA workshops and webinars underscore the lessons students experience in their paid internships. In its evaluation of outcomes, it found that “85 percent of supervisors rate the soft skills and business etiquette of their YouthForce intern as either favorable or similar to a typical entry-level employee.” Graduating students have the option of continuing on to college or using the skills and training acquired in the program to land jobs with local employers.

Tatyana Reimoneng, the [sister of a YouthForce NOLA participant](#), says of her brother: “My dream is for him to become whatever he wants to become as long as it is something positive...I just want him to achieve it and stay focused on it.”²² She believes the program has the advantage of “helping him develop a business or a craft or a skill. The program gave him a visualization of how to go about things and the ability to have confidence in himself.”

In addition to soft skills students build social capital through their internships, mentorships, and professional immersion. The earlier that students begin to build personal networks, the easier time they will have finding employment

after graduation. Because students are placed in paid internships, they can develop references and expand their professional network to be better positioned to achieve economic mobility.

KEY THEME 03: SUPPORTIVE OR WRAPAROUND SERVICES

The need for supportive or wraparound services to help students get across the finish line.

Case studies:

Urban Alliance

Harlem Children's Zone

MEETING STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE WITH SUPPORTIVE, WRAPAROUND SERVICES

Many students are facing challenges at home and in their communities that make it harder for them to stay on task with their schoolwork and graduate on time. Programs that provide one-on-one counseling and wraparound services, such as [positive behavioral supports](#), parent and family engagement, and even [mental and physical health supports](#), can meet students where they are and help them navigate challenges to success.^{23,24}

Case Study:

[Urban Alliance](#) partners with over 200 employers in a few regions around the country to prevent students from becoming disconnected from school or work.²⁵ It gives teens and young adults equal access to economic opportunity by providing paid internships and early employment, soft skills and workforce readiness training, mentoring, and supportive services. According to an [evaluation](#) conducted by the Urban Institute, the program has shown

promising results so far and Urban Alliance [asserts that](#), “100 percent of program alumni graduate high school on time and 80 percent of program alumni remain “connected” to a pathway – including college, employment, or a career training program—one year after graduating from Urban Alliance.”^{26,27}

Denardo Worthy, a [2019 participant](#) in an Urban Alliance internship, says, “Urban Alliance meant another family for me. There’s a lot of people out there that don’t have [any]one to look up to, but Urban Alliance gives you a paid internship, it gives you a mentor, someone to look up to, talk to, or just someone there to be there for you ... It helps me feel not alone. It helps me feel that that no matter what somebody is always watching me, rooting for me, shouting for me.”²⁸

Case Study:

The [Harlem Children’s Zone](#) began with the mission to end intergenerational poverty in Harlem and grew into a model for comprehensive “neighborhood” education.²⁹ The program was designed to be a holistic approach to childhood development in school, work, and other aspects of community-life. It offers workshops, training programs, and schools designed to support students from infancy through college and tackle the many obstacles standing in their way to college graduation. For example, after finding that almost half of their students were overweight or obese, HCZ launched the Healthy Harlem program to promote nutritional education and healthy lifestyles. A [study conducted by Mathematica](#) found that participating students decreased their “BMI z-scores” ([used to assess weight and obesity in growing children and adolescents](#)) by an average of 9.0 points after three years and the overall program saw an 18.4 percent decrease of overweight or obese kids.^{30,31} In

addition to wellness initiatives, HCZ has been shown to have academic benefits. A [study conducted by Harvard University](#) found that the Zone’s Promise Academy schools had effectively closed “the black–white achievement gap in mathematics” for middle-school students and significantly reduced it in English Language Arts (ELA).³²

[Research](#) has found that many high-risk students who receive wraparound support are more likely to graduate and reconnect with educational goals as they overcome individual barriers to focusing on their schoolwork.³³ Because many at-risk youth slip through the cracks of educational institutions without the right support systems or individualized attention, some public-school districts are making greater efforts to provide wraparound supports. District Administration reports that Union Public Schools in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where 70 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (FRL), partnered with the University of Oklahoma to open medical clinics at two of its highest poverty elementary schools. It also [partners with other organizations](#) to offer mental health care, nutrition programs, free immunizations, and early childhood and adult education.³⁴

Another example is the Los Angeles Unified School District, which now offers mental health, dental and vision screenings, in addition to wellness and immigrant student services. Many of these services [are already funded through Medicaid or other state programs](#) designed to support vulnerable students.³⁵ In cities such as Jacksonville, Tulsa, and Pittsburgh, mayors have used their platforms [to lead city-wide mentor recruitment campaigns](#) and drive public-private coordination in expanding mentoring opportunities for young people.³⁶

Public policies at the local, state, and federal level should be better aligned to close “the mentoring gap.” While tremendous improvement has been made, a 2014 Civic Enterprises survey for The National Mentoring Partnership (NMP) determined that [approximately 16 million youth, including nine million at-risk youth, will reach age 19 without ever having a mentor.](#)³⁷ NMP recommends community leaders adopt best practices that have already been tested and proven at the federal level and in other states, including by integrating mentoring into the strategies of state agencies that promote education, youth development, and community service. Governors, state agencies, mayors, and other leaders should examine their current portfolios for opportunities to close the mentoring gap. For example, they could develop interagency task forces, launch competitive grants, and promote quality mentoring through dedicated dollars that achieve education, service and volunteering, and juvenile justice goals.

Through strategic partnerships with existing organizations, community partners, and universities, public school districts can expand services without breaking the bank, while benefiting students and their families and helping them graduate on time.

KEY THEME 04: EARNING CREDITS TOWARDS POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

High schools that help students earn credits toward postsecondary education along the way to graduation.

Case studies:

P-TECH schools

EARNING CREDITS TOWARDS DEGREES AND CREDENTIALS ON THE WAY TO GRADUATION

Another promising model for helping teens and young adults better transition to adulthood and work are schools that help them earn credits, credentials, certifications, or even industry-recognized associate degrees, on their way to high school graduation. In these programs, students take college-level coursework simultaneously with their high-school classes.

Case Study:

[P-TECH schools](#) in New York were created by IBM to prepare middle- and high-school students with the academic, technical, and professional skills necessary to succeed in the workforce.³⁸ Students take college coursework while in high-school and engage in industry-guided workforce development. According to their [mission statement](#), “P-TECH schools span grades 9-14 and enable students to earn both a high school diploma and a no-cost, two-year postsecondary degree in a STEM field. Students participate in a range of workplace experiences, including mentorship, worksite visits and paid internships. Upon graduation, students have the academic and professional skills required to either continue their education in a four-year postsecondary institution or enter into entry-level careers in IT, healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and other competitive fields. While the P-TECH Model encompasses six years, students are able to move at their own pace, enabling some to accelerate through the model in as little as four years.”³⁹ A [2020 evaluation](#) of P-TECH schools in New York City found that students were more likely to pass the ELA Regents exam with a qualifying score to enroll in City University of New York (CUNY), compared with non-P-TECH students.⁴⁰

Rashid David, founding principal of P-TECH schools, shared during a PPI webinar that, “Our students have the opportunity to go into college course-taking as early as the summer after 9th grade. We’ve already completed four cohorts, grades 9-14, and we are 97% Black and Hispanic, with at least 70% of the students being Black males. Of those four cohorts that have already completed, 46% have earned the STEM degree.”

[Arianna Mayes](#), a student at 21st Century Charter School in Indiana set to graduate in 2021, described the benefits of early college high school and degree acceleration: “I’m a senior and so far, I’ve already earned my Associate’s degree and in ninth grade, I began my college classes.”⁴¹

Early college high schools, such as P-TECH and 21st Century Charter, allow high school students to enroll in college coursework or training toward an industry-recognized credential and certification. These give teens and young adults a head start on getting the skills necessary to succeed once they graduate high school. Many states allow dual enrollment in college classes for high school students—usually for 11th and 12th graders—with no cost to them. To learn more, and to hear directly from the founding principal of P-Tech High School Rashid Davis, as well as other leaders of charter schools using similar models, view the Progressive Policy Institute’s webinar: “[Creating Opportunity for All with Early College High Schools](#).”⁴²

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Biden administration should follow through on the promise of providing grants to states to accelerate students’ attainment of quality credentials, degrees, career and technical education, and opportunities in job training programs.
- States should align all workforce readiness programs, including targeting CTE funding for programs that ensure career pathways. These should include programs that offer training for industry credentials and certificates that can follow students as they enter the job market.
- Districts and schools should foster relationships with local employers that better match students with demand in the labor market and create more opportunities for paid, work-based learning through internships, work shadowing, mentorships, and registered apprenticeships.
- States should implement policies that credit accelerated college-level coursework, such as through early college high schools, and dual enrollment programs. They should also require their public universities to give full credit for these courses—something that is not common practice now and is detrimental to students. This would ensure that students are given advanced standing and degrees for these courses, and likely make them more attractive.
- States should invest in wraparound services that meet high-risk students where they are and help them graduate on time. Many students do not graduate because they lack the support they need to accomplish their education goals.
- Policymakers at the state and local level should devote resources to closing the mentorship gap, including by integrating mentorship goals into existing priorities. For example, they could develop interagency task forces, launch competitive grants, and promote quality mentoring through dedicated dollars that achieve education, service and volunteering, and juvenile justice goals.

CONCLUSION

The need to build more pathways to work for young adults that begin in middle and high school is overwhelming. Programs that provide work-based learning better prepare students by giving them hands-on exposure to work, developing their soft skills and social capital, giving them valuable credentials and certificates, and connecting them with potential employers in their communities. They also give young adults the choice of pursuing non-college pathways to careers.

Now more than ever, many students are at risk of not getting across the finish line because of personal challenges. Key to ensuring their success is providing supportive services that meet students where they are and help them graduate on-time and ready to pursue postsecondary education or find jobs. Since a significant share of high school graduates do not go on to postsecondary schooling, we also need to provide pathways for these students to remain connected to work and opportunity. The transition from school to adulthood is a difficult one, all the more if young adults are not set up with the training and skills necessary to gain their economic footing early on.

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