





Pursuing Purpose:

A Playbook for Meaningful Student Engagement

PUBLISHED BY
THE COMMISSION ON
PURPOSEFUL PATHWAYS

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resources from the Commission:

-  [A Launchpad for Life](#)
-  [High-Impact Practices Action Guide](#)
-  [Enabling Conditions Action Guide](#)
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**This playbook was made possible by support from the Gates Foundation,
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Contents

PART 1

Purposeful Pathways Weave Together Proven Practices to Deliver Meaningful Student Experiences

Section I:	Introduction	3
Section II:	Putting Pathways in Context: Engagement Desires and Disengagement Challenges	9
	Student Story: Cammie Allen	13
	Student Story: Lovell Lee	15
	Student Story: LaToya Beecham	17
Section III:	Ensuring the Collab is in Collaboration	19

PART 2

What Role To Play In Supporting Youth

Section IV:	Strengthening the Role of Adult Champions	30
Section V:	A Tool for Analyzing the Impact of a School or Organization's Work	35
Section VI:	Engagement Spotlights	37
Section VII:	Call to Action	45

PART 1

Purposeful Pathways Weave Together Proven Practices to Deliver Meaningful Student Experiences

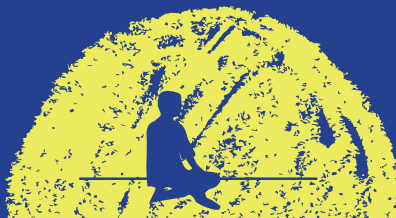


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The best thing about school and internships is having opportunities and experiences that motivate you in what you want your career to be.

—
LOVELL LEE



[READ LOVELL'S STORY](#)

Introduction

As schools and systems double down on workforce development and career-connected learning, one critical question is often overlooked: *Whose voices are shaping pathways?* Every student should graduate from high school feeling empowered to pursue their passions, make an impact, and access further education that leads to a family-sustaining income. Yet even as pathways expand, too many students remain on the outside looking in, experiencing programs that are designed *for* them, rather than *with* them.

Education has the potential to break cycles of poverty, expand opportunity, and strengthen our economy, but when it fails to reflect the realities, interests, and aspirations of young people, these impacts are often limited. Adults who work with youth—in schools, communities, workplaces, and beyond—play a vital role by meeting students where they are and helping them move forward with purpose. But truly effective support requires more than guidance.

The [Commission on Purposeful Pathways](#) is a cross-sector group of education, workforce and community leaders convened to develop a national vision for how high school experiences can better prepare young people for postsecondary education, careers, and long-term economic mobility. Its March 2026 report, [A Launchpad for Life: A Vision for Purposeful Pathways for All Students](#), introduces programmatic experiences and the intentional cultivation of agency that should be provided to every student so they can confidently say,

“

I know who I am, I know where I'm going, and I know who can help me get there.

This playbook builds on that vision, but focuses on a different question, posed to a different audience:

How can the adults closest to young people ensure that purposeful pathways are shaped with students, not just delivered to them?

The Commission highlights several experiences as especially powerful in leading students to and helping them continue on strong pathways. In this playbook, those same experiences serve as the foundation for reflection, co-design, and action with young people, including:



Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUImages

quality **advising** that helps students imagine bigger futures, building connections and taking ownership of their education goals and choices

accelerated course sequences and options to take advanced and/or college courses early

career-connected learning (CCL) that exposes students to the world of work

a sense of **belonging** and connection to **purpose**

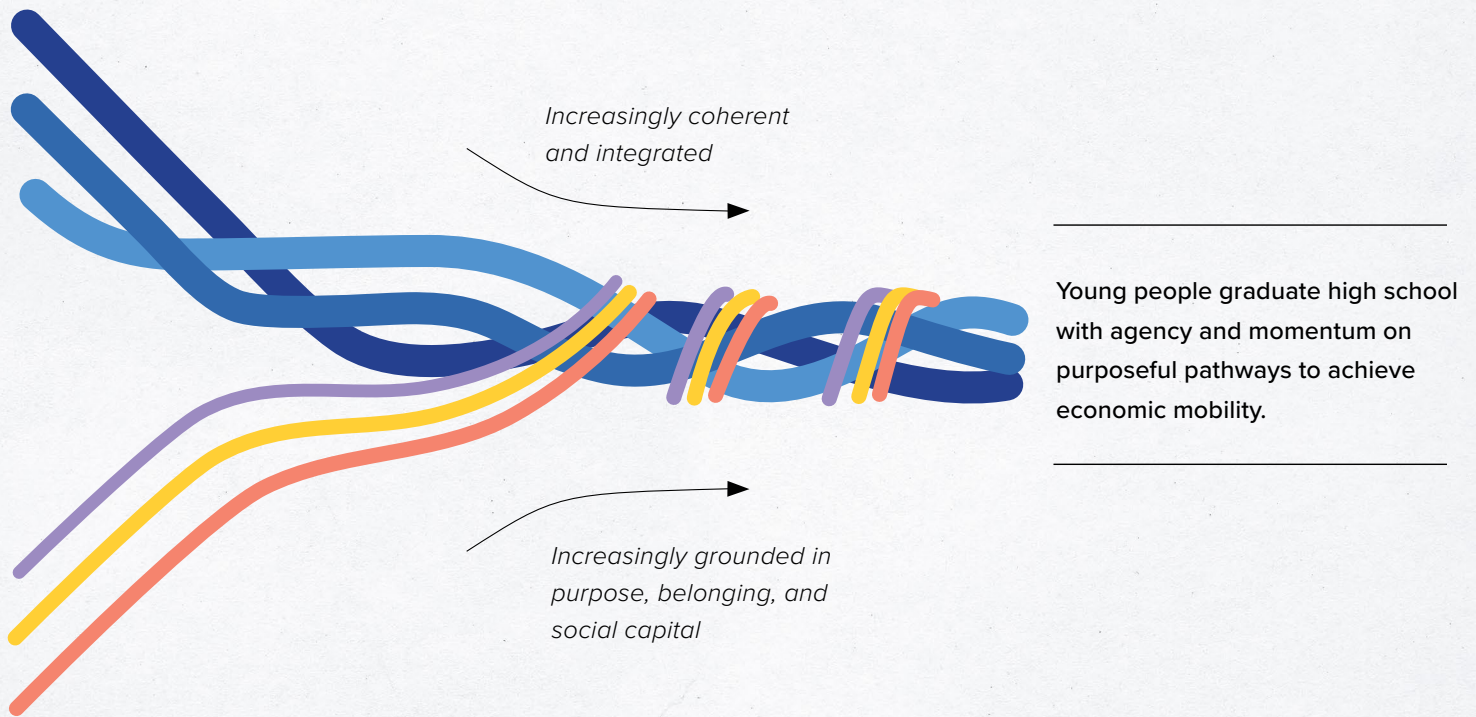
opportunities to build and deepen **social capital** and trusted networks

How can the adults closest to young people ensure that purposeful pathways are shaped with students, not just delivered to them?

The bipartisan support for pathways work and the strong progress many communities have made in this area signal the urgency for school and community leaders to commit to strengthening pathway programs and prioritizing student engagement in the process of co-designing those programs.

Purposeful Pathways Framework

The Commission's Vision: All students should experience high-quality advising, accelerated coursework, and career-connected learning that cultivate purpose, belonging, and social capital.



PROGRAMMATIC EXPERIENCES

- High-Quality Advising
- Accelerated Coursework Sequences
- Career-Connected Learning

CULTIVATION OF AGENCY

- Purpose
- Belonging
- Social Capital

Where this playbook came from:

This content was co-designed and co-authored by high school students and young adults up to age 24 with support from experts on student voice and engagement at Big Picture Learning. [The Youth Advisory group members](#) that informed this work share a belief that all students should have the opportunities and support to reach their full potential. Representing all parts of the country, the Youth Advisory developed recommendations for youth-serving adults on how to collaborate and *co-design with youth at the center* to ensure that young people are supported in finding their own purposeful pathways.



Who this playbook is for:

This playbook is intended to be used by those who support young people in their day-to-day lives—educators, school leaders, counselors, families, and more. Each of these supportive groups brings a different perspective and responsibility to the work. Whether adults are shaping classroom experiences, designing school structures, advising students on next steps, or nurturing them at home, this guide offers ways to more intentionally involve young people in decisions that affect their pathways.

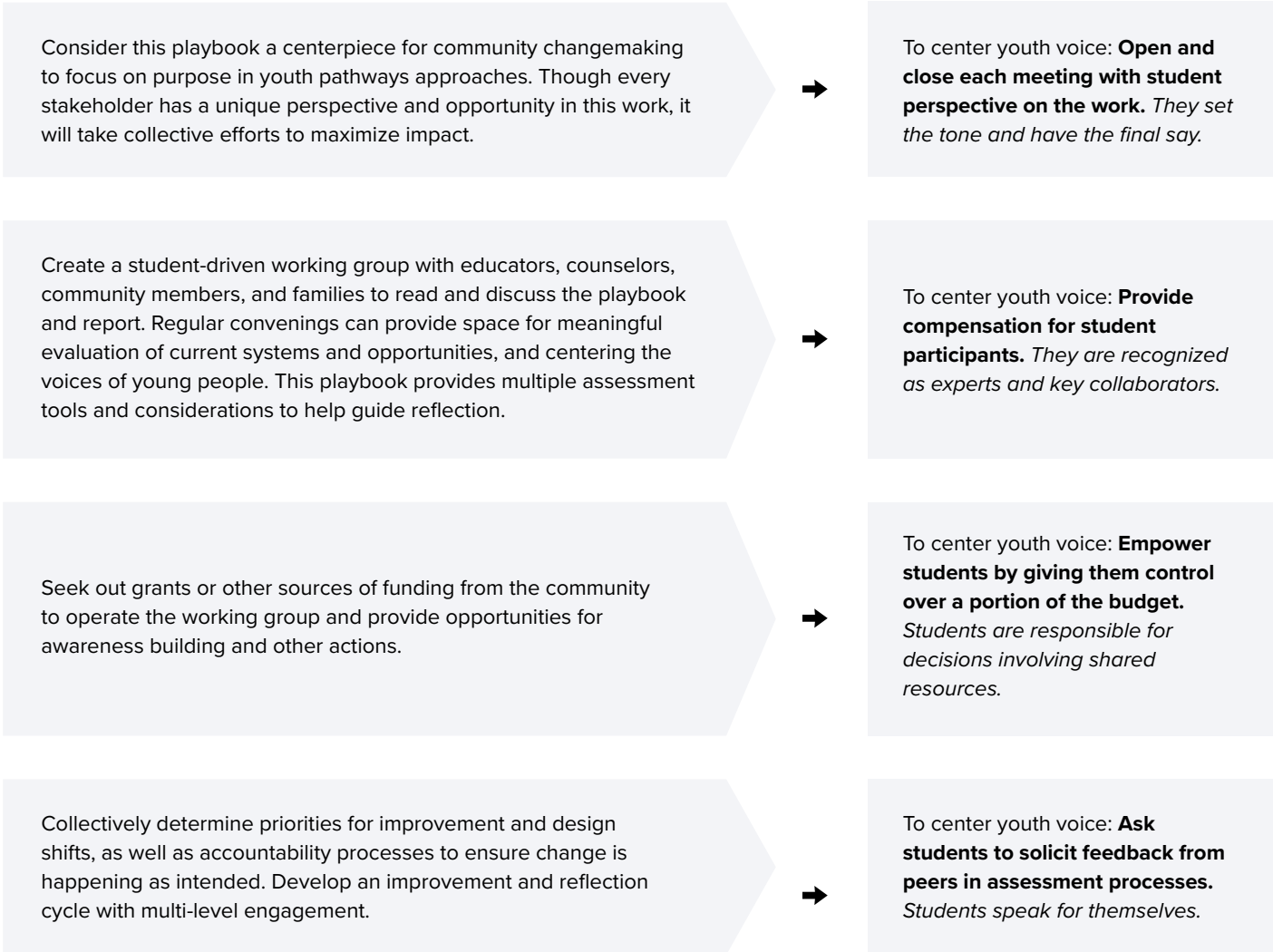
The suggestions to follow highlight how different audiences can use this playbook, offering entry points based upon roles and questions that may be top-of-mind. While no approach is perfect, this playbook is designed to build on that existing commitment and effort. This playbook can be helpful to students as well, with ideas for how they can shape their own learning and the schools and communities that surround them.

We recognize that the adults reading this are navigating limited time, shrinking budgets, understaffed teams, and a broader climate that can make even well-intentioned efforts difficult to sustain. This playbook does not ignore those realities. Instead, it offers ways to move forward within those challenges and constraints. Small shifts—a single conversation with a student, a redesigned advisory experience, or a change in how decisions are made—can meaningfully increase student voice and agency. The frameworks, stories, and reflection exercises to follow are designed to meet readers where they are, not where conditions are ideal.

Activating Community Around This Playbook

Purposeful pathways only come to fruition when a broad set of partners work together in communities to support student transitions. Schools and districts, community-based organizations, employers, higher education administrators, and more all need to come together to build, sustain, and evolve pathways that really serve students.

A few approaches to activating community leaders around student-centered pathways design:



Activation Tips

For Teachers

Focus on using the playbook to deepen the role of educators as champions for students—particularly as an academic motivator and a trusted adult.

- ▶ Complete the reflection exercises to assess your current level of student engagement.
- ▶ Use the [student stories](#) to spark conversations about how classroom learning connects to real-world purpose.
- ▶ Use the co-design strategies to help you move from learning *for* students to learning *with* and *from* them. Use the co-design strategies to bring student voice into curriculum and project design.
- ▶ Prioritize what your young people care about. Work with them to center opportunities to address the issues, topics, and areas of concern that matter to them as areas for learning and exploration.

For Counselors

Focus on using the playbook to examine your positioning with young people in individual pathways work.

- ▶ Consider if there are shifts you can make in your partnership with students that will support greater student agency.
- ▶ Review your curricular resources through the lens of the playbook recommendations. See what can be refreshed, reexamined, and reimaged.
- ▶ Think about how the playbook can help you build a network of supporters and advocates to increase resources and opportunities that center students' interests and curiosities.

For School & System Leaders

Focus on using the playbook as a culture change tool.

- ▶ Examine learning and advising structures, and how well your school creates conditions for belonging, purpose, and social capital.
- ▶ Spend time on the reflection questions in [Section V](#), which are especially relevant here. Principals can use the program spotlights as models for what student-centered environments look like at scale.

For Families

Focus on the playbook as a window into what purposeful pathways look like and how you can actively support your learner's exploration rather than defaulting to familiar career tracks.

- ▶ Learn from the student stories, which illustrate how internships, advising, and dual enrollment open unexpected doors—and then encourage pursuing such opportunities.
- ▶ Use the calls to action in [Section VII](#), which provide some concrete starting points, like beginning career conversations early and engaging with your learner's school around advanced coursework and career-connected opportunities.

For Students

Focus on using this playbook as a tool to take a more active role in shaping your learning and future pathways.

- ▶ Look to the [student stories](#) for ideas and inspiration, noticing how others explored opportunities, built relationships, and took steps toward their own goals.
- ▶ Engage the adults in your life (teachers, mentors, family members, and more) as partners by asking questions, sharing ideas, and advocating for what matters to you.
- ▶ Take steps to regularly explore your interests and build your networks, whether through internships, conversations, or new learning experiences.

Putting Pathways in Context: Engagement Desires and Disengagement Challenges

Students tend to feel motivated and optimistic through high school, but that motivation may be more fragile than it appears, changing after high school for some. Research conducted by the [Walton Family Foundation and Gallup in 2025](#) and published as the “Voices of Gen Z Study” found that:

56%

56% of Generation Z students currently enrolled in middle or high school indicated that they are “thriving” in their lives, meaning they rate their current lives positively and anticipate they will continue to rate their lives positively in five years.

39%

After high school, Gen Z’s sense of thriving starts to decline—with just 39% of the full sample of respondents, who were between the ages of 18 and 28, reporting a positive outlook. Yet, overall, about three-quarters of Gen Z (of all ages) agree they have a great future ahead of them.

This pattern suggests a critical inflection point: Many young people begin with optimism, but lose it as they transition out of high school. This raises a key question:

How can school experiences better sustain and translate that early optimism into long-term direction and opportunity?



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library/Altered

Other research, including an [EdWeek Research Center study](#) published in 2023, shows how the majority of 13- to 19-year-olds feel motivated about their learning:

14%

Just 14% of students indicated feeling unmotivated to do their best in school.



About 8 in 10 students believed their teachers were motivated to teach them.

In other words, students are not broadly unmotivated, but many still feel unprepared for their futures. In fact, fewer than 30% of high school students report feeling “very prepared” to pursue the education or career pathway they are interested in, reflecting a broader disconnect between students’ aspirations and the guidance and support available to help them plan effectively before graduation. This disconnect underscores a critical challenge for school leaders: ensuring that learning experiences are shaped *with* students, not just for them. Creating intentional opportunities for student voice in program design—and grounding experiences in interest-based, student-centered learning—can help close this gap and better support students as they transition to college and careers.



Many of the challenges students experience are not the result of a lack of motivation or effort. They are the predictable outcomes of systems that have not consistently made learning relevant, connected, or responsive to their lives. When school feels disconnected from real opportunities, unclear in purpose, or removed from students' identities and aspirations, it becomes harder for young people to see themselves in what they are learning.

Students may also be feeling:

- Unprepared and uninformed.** What should be learned and taught—and *how*—has never been harder to answer. According to a 2025 report by [OECD](#), about half of 15- and 16-year-old students polled indicated that school had done very little to prepare them for adult life. Regarding possible paths after high school, 34 percent of students did not feel well-informed of their options. Revealed in the report, titled *The State of Global Teenage Career Preparation*, less than 30 percent of 16- to 18-year-olds felt significantly ready to pursue their desired postsecondary options. For practitioners, this highlights the importance of not only providing information, but actively involving students in exploring and shaping their pathways so that options feel real, relevant, and attainable.



34%

Regarding possible paths after high school, **34 percent of students did not feel well-informed of their options.**

2025 [OECD](#) report

45%

Just 45 percent of high school students reported having visited a workplace.

2025 [OECD](#) report

Photo by Allison Shelley/EDUimages/Altered

- **Unaware of the breadth of available career paths.** School systems increasingly consider themselves responsible for providing solid exposure to careers, including higher-wage paths. Yet, in the OECD survey, just 45 percent had visited a workplace. Students should be encouraged to visit multiple worksites in the same way they make multiple college visits. They should also be encouraged to sample CTE and dual enrollment programming. Students who start on a career path before getting real-world exposure may miss an opportunity to determine what's a good fit before they invest in or train for a degree. Parents may also strongly encourage traditional high-paying careers—such as law, medicine, or engineering—in part because they're unfamiliar with other fields with strong returns. Indeed, teen job preferences continue to cluster around a [handful of familiar professions](#). Expanding exposure is not just about access. It's about giving students a voice in what they explore so that they can make informed decisions based on experience rather than assumption.
 - **Isolated, lonely, and unaware.** A lack of high-quality advising—an issue, in part, because of the nationwide [school counselor shortage](#)—can result in students feeling there's no one there to help them as they struggle with decision-making on high school courses and programs as well as on post secondary planning. Also, when advising time is light, students are less likely to get guidance on postsecondary options. Strengthening advising is not only about increasing access. It's also about deepening relationships and ensuring that students are active participants in conversations about their own futures.
 - **Alienated and disconnected (and, frankly, bored).** In the OECD study, more than one in three students reported not feeling they had learned anything interesting in the past seven days. Their passions are often not part of their educational experience. Students need but may lack [supportive relationships](#) that help them envision their success and see the future in a positive light. We know from our own experiences as students, when learning is disconnected from student interests, engagement drops. But when students help shape their learning, relevance and motivation increase.
- Across these challenges, a common thread emerges: students are often being *acted upon* rather than *engaged* as partners in shaping their learning and future pathways. Co-creation offers a different starting point where student interests, concerns, and lived experiences actively shape the learning environment they are surrounded by. When young people help design the pathways they walk, those experiences become more relevant, more motivating, and more likely to lead somewhere that matters to them.



One Student's Story: Cammie Allen

WASHINGTON, NEAR SEATTLE

“

He told me ... that I deserved to be respected. That changed everything for me.



At Gibson Ek High School in Washington, located near Seattle, Cammie Allen learned that education is most powerful when it connects one's interests with the real world. And for Cammie, policy work has long been the plan. “Middle school is when I really got into that,” she says. “Being, like, a chronic empath, to a fault, I couldn't stop watching the news, and it was really affecting me. That's when I kind of decided that rather than just stand by, I wanted to get politically involved.”

Career-related learning experiences in high school included serving in the Washington State Page Program, working alongside senators and drafting mock legislation. Cammie also spent time as an intern at the Holocaust Center for Humanity, where she testified in support of an education bill while still in ninth grade. These experiences—supported by her school's project-based learning focus that includes helping students pursue an interest-aligned internship—helped Cammie recognize that school could be a place to take action, not just prepare for it.

Relationships shaped every step of Cammie's journey. Her high school advisor encouraged bold ideas and guided her to connect her learning to real-world impact.

In addition, Cammie participated in Washington’s [Running Start](#) dual enrollment program, earning college credit at Bellevue College while in high school. Unlike with many dual enrollment programs, Running Start allows high school students access to any undergraduate class. Among the five courses Cammie took, those in political science and American Sign Language gave her a sense of agency and academic readiness. The courses helped her see herself as a capable college student who could manage her time, navigate new systems, and engage in complex conversations—even offensive interactions where people, particularly male peers, would talk down to her. “Being in political science, I’ve already had so many guys, like engineering majors, try to talk to me about politics,” Cammie shared. “And I’m like, ‘I know that, why are you acting like you’re smarter than me? We can have a civil conversation together without you talking down to me.’” Such experiences gave her the confidence to know that she was more than capable of thriving in higher ed spaces.

Relationships shaped every step of Cammie’s journey. Her high school advisor encouraged bold ideas and guided her to connect her learning to real-world impact. Additionally, her mentor at the Holocaust Center treated her as an equal and reminded her that her voice and perspective were valuable and necessary. “In a lot of those spheres of higher education and policy-making, there’s almost this hierarchy where young people don’t feel like they belong,” she says. “When one person I looked up to made me feel like I belonged, I felt like I could achieve so much more.”

She remains involved in the center, now as a board of directors student representative. The social capital gained from such connections continues to guide her as a political science major at Cal Poly. “Education is the most powerful thing in our society,” she says. “We need to treat it as sacred and design it so every student feels they belong.”

CULTIVATION OF AGENCY

Purposeful Pathways

PURPOSE

Having *multiple* career-connected learning experiences tied to her interests helped Cammie find a sense of purpose.

BELONGING

Though there was some concern working with a 9th grader at that time, her mentor provided unwavering support and encouragement.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Cammie was able to build a network of supportive adults in her life who continue to provide guidance and mentorship, building her confidence in the value she brings to her work.

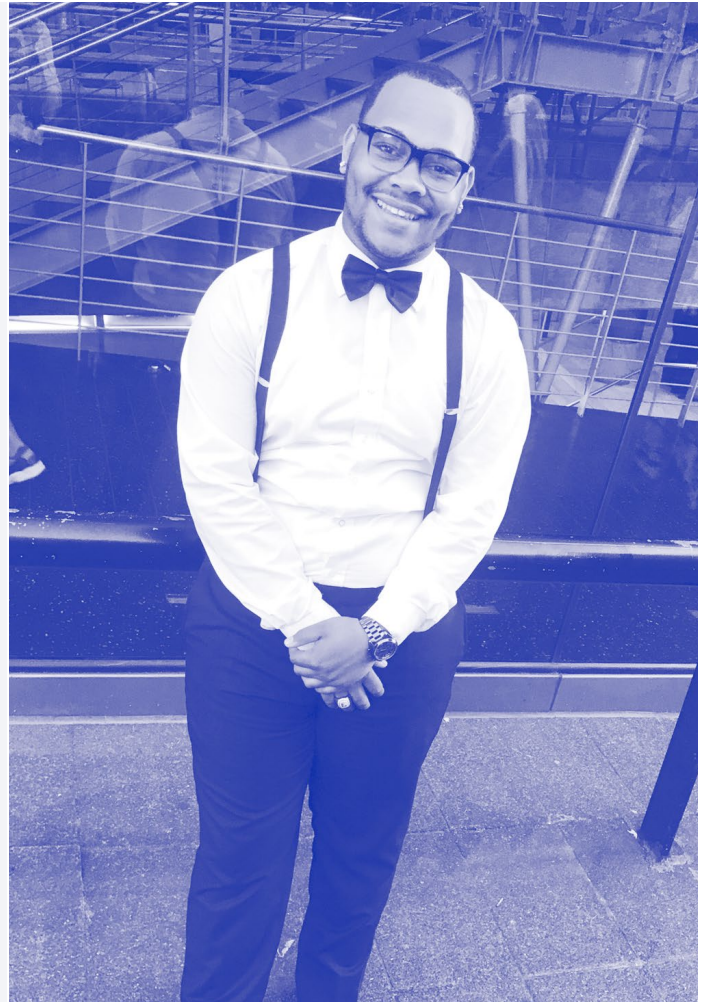


One Student's Story: Lovell Lee

NEW YORK, THE BRONX

“

The best thing about school and internships is having opportunities and experiences that motivate you in what you want your career to be.



Career-connected learning played a critical role in Lovell's development.

Raised in the Bronx, [where poverty is prevalent and most students complete high school not ready for college-level work](#), Lovell Lee encountered few programs or mentors ready to help him on the path to success. “I’m a triplet, African-American and Latino, and there weren’t many opportunities for me if I didn’t seek them out,” he says. As one of three kids from the same family going to school at the same time, he adds, “I never understood or fathomed how I didn’t qualify for more programs.”

The guidance and support from his father, however, never wavered. Lovell’s solid family foundation gave him the confidence to explore all of his interests, while also considering the need to be financially stable. He initially had an interest in communications and broadcasting, but would come to learn that his true passion was in service.

As Lovell navigated freshman year at Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School, a community school, he noticed that a particular group of his peers met each week to work collectively toward building and sustaining a healthy school environment. He soon joined the Student Government to serve alongside those peers in designing and facilitating youth-led spaces that gave voice to the ideas and challenges they faced. Collaboration and co-designing were embedded deeply within his school's culture. This sense of community would deepen Lovell's curiosity on what else could be possible if students had agency.

Career-connected learning played a critical role in Lovell's development. He would eventually juggle his duties as Student Government President with exciting real-world learning opportunities such as [SEO Scholars](#) (a free, eight-year high school program that guides students through high school and college), [Student Diplomacy Corps](#) (a program providing underserved students with access to dynamic study-away opportunities), and [MSG Classroom](#) (for high school students interested in television industry careers). These opportunities to gain academic success skills, travel experiences, and career exploration were presented to him by his advisor and other teachers in large part because Lovell had developed a reputation for being proactive and reliable.

While ideally every student would be made aware of similar impactful programs, Lovell's actions could be suggested to students anywhere. For example, he would often stop at his high school's Student Success Center to receive application support and advising, learn about upcoming info sessions, or just get a pep talk. His school was a safe place for him to explore and try new things, free from judgement and rooted in care.

Lovell felt equipped to pursue a career in education that would position him to impact young lives in the same ways his mentors had done for him. Today, Lovell is a first-year high school teacher in New York City Public Schools while actively pursuing his second master's degree, in Educational Leadership.

CULTIVATION OF AGENCY

Purposeful Pathways

PURPOSE

Lovell had a number of opportunities and **career-connected learning** experiences in high school, both through school partnerships and national programs, that allowed him to pursue his genuine interests.

BELONGING

Lovell was surrounded by a strong peer leadership community with **supportive adult champions** who encouraged student-led initiatives to help create an inclusive, supportive school culture.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Through his career-connected learning experiences, Lovell was able to **leverage his relationships**, including with his school's community partner organization; he stayed in touch with organization leaders, secured a paid position there during college, and later his connections helped him find his first post-college job.



One Student's Story: LaToya Beecham

NEW YORK, THE BRONX

“

With the Summer Youth Employment Program campaign, we were focused on an issue we all cared about, and I got to take everything I was learning and put it into action.



During her time at HERO High—or Health, Education, and Research Occupations High School, a CTE school—in the Bronx, LaToya landed two significant opportunities that helped shape her trajectory. Her ambassador program fellowship at Here to Here (a local nonprofit uniting employers, educators, and community-based organizations) and an internship at [Teens Take Charge](#) (a student-led New York City organization that empowers public school students to build an equitable school system) opened doors to advocacy and community work, helping her see how young people can influence change. During the pandemic, she worked on a campaign to save jobs via the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) for teens. The opportunities built LaToya's confidence and gave her a clearer sense of purpose, transforming curiosity into commitment.

Her coursework and career learning experiences were especially meaningful given the challenges she faced as a student with autism and dyscalculia (which makes understanding math concepts difficult). While support staff service time provided via her Individualized Education Plan sometimes felt impersonal and inadequate, LaToya's teachers and social worker created space for her to thrive. Earning an A in AP English and completing a Certified Nursing Assistant program—one of several certification programs offered at the school, which focuses on work-based learning and student career plan development—showed her that she could succeed when learning felt connected to what she valued. These experiences honored her lived knowledge and helped her turn what she'd learned as a caregiver for her grandmother and community into academic and professional strengths.

Her coursework
and career learning
experiences were
especially meaningful
given the challenges
she faced ...

Advising and mentorship became lifelines in LaToya's journey. A college readiness counselor guided her through the application process and helped her secure a scholarship to the University at Buffalo, while a social worker provided steady encouragement and affirmation. Together, they helped LaToya move beyond stigma and self-doubt, showing her that learning differences do not define limits.

Another impactful mentoring relationship developed through the Here to Here program, where LaToya served as a junior broker of real-world learning opportunities for peers. The vice president of policy and impact offered her an internship as Youth Policy Advisor, which allowed her to work closely with program leaders to advocate for increased work-based learning opportunities for New York City youth.

CULTIVATION OF AGENCY

Purposeful Pathways

PURPOSE

Through an ambassadorship program at Here to Here, doors to pursue advocacy and policy emerged, further centering LaToya's interests in her learning.

BELONGING

LaToya's social worker played a pivotal role in helping her feel a sense of belonging—key in supporting her to turn her lived experiences as a neurodiverse individual into opportunities.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social workers, program directors, and peers collectively supported and enabled LaToya to pursue her passions in authentic ways, with one mentor offering the opportunity to work alongside the organization's leadership in advocacy efforts.

Ensuring the Collab is in Collaboration

In recent years, particularly in the wake of the pandemic, the term “student voice” has become widely used—but is it used superficially? Schools and youth-serving organizations increasingly claim they co-design with young people, yet the process may be missing the depth or intentionality required for meaningful engagement.

In practice, the difference between performative and authentic engagement is often visible in who holds decision-making power, how student input is used, and whether young people see their ideas reflected in real changes. When this work is done well, it doesn’t just create opportunities for students to share opinions. It shifts how learning is designed, experienced, and improved over time.

In schools where students feel true purpose and connection, adults are creating inclusive, student-centered environments that allow space for true student agency. Such environments allow students to be the drivers of their own learning and exploration, as well as work with adult champions to have voice, and choice, in designing learning.



Photo by Allison Shelley for
EDImages/Altered

PATHWAYS WORK IN PROGRESS: SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

An issue that has long plagued the education of students with disabilities is whether there are *enough* resources to support all the students who need them. Many schools lack staff such as [social workers](#), [psychologists](#), [counselors](#), and [school nurses](#), and [negative Covid-era](#) shutdown impacts on this population have been documented. A lack of tailored supports often leaves students without purposeful pathways—leading to feelings of isolation, trauma, and even dropout.

Students aging out of public education without an understanding of available resources or self-advocacy skills may well feel as if the education system failed them. They face significant barriers to employment, as well, with November 2025 [Department of Labor data](#) showing that only about 4 in 10 individuals aged 16 to 64 who have a disability participate in the labor force.

The unfortunate [reality](#) is that low-income and minority students are most affected by this ill-fitting system, as they are less likely to be placed in a general education setting compared to others with disabilities. Under federal mandate, all students are entitled to an education in the [least restrictive environment](#)—which typically means spending at least some time in mainstream classrooms, even if doing so means providing one-on-one support.

No matter the severity of an individual’s challenges, the priority should always be ensuring needs are met through meaningful interventions that positively shape the educational experience. Adult champions in schools can:

- Be advocates for change, willing to speak up at the decision-making table and call attention to the needs of different students (parents, community members, and private therapy providers may be able to assist with perspective).
- Empower students as they become the changemakers, in their own education.
- Ensure students receiving special education supports have a say in their education; allow them to sit in on meetings, and be aware of their needs. Without opportunities to be mobilized in their own lives, they won’t get to build the muscle to advocate for themselves and what they need.
- Be motivated by what these learners can do as opposed to being discouraged by what they cannot.

Shifts supported by this playbook.





Resources to Support This Work

Ready to turn the ideas in this playbook into action? The following frameworks, exercises, and examples can support reflection on current practices, surface opportunities to deepen student engagement, and provide concrete starting points for co-designing with young people.

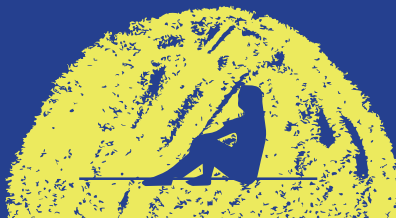
Each resource is paired with real-world examples and reflection prompts to help adapt these approaches to the local context, whether at the early stages of implementation or building on existing efforts.

- 1. Hart's Ladder of Participation**
 - **Adult Champion Reflection #1: What's My Rung?**
 - **Adult Champion Reflection #2: Increasing Youth Voice and Agency**
- 2. Youth-Adult Co-Creation**
- 3. Mentoring With Purpose: Ideas for Internship Supervisors**
 - **Adult Champion Reflection #3: What's My Role?**
 - **Boosting Young People's Social Capital: Actions for Adult Champions**
- 4. College Access Research & Action (CARA): Right to College Program**
- 5. New Tech Network (NTN)**
- 6. Johanna Echols-Hansen (JEH) Continuation High School | Cloverdale, CA**

“

With the Summer Youth Employment Program campaign, we were focused on an issue we all cared about, and I got to take everything I was learning and put it into action.

—
LATOYA BEECHAM



[READ LATOYA'S STORY](#)

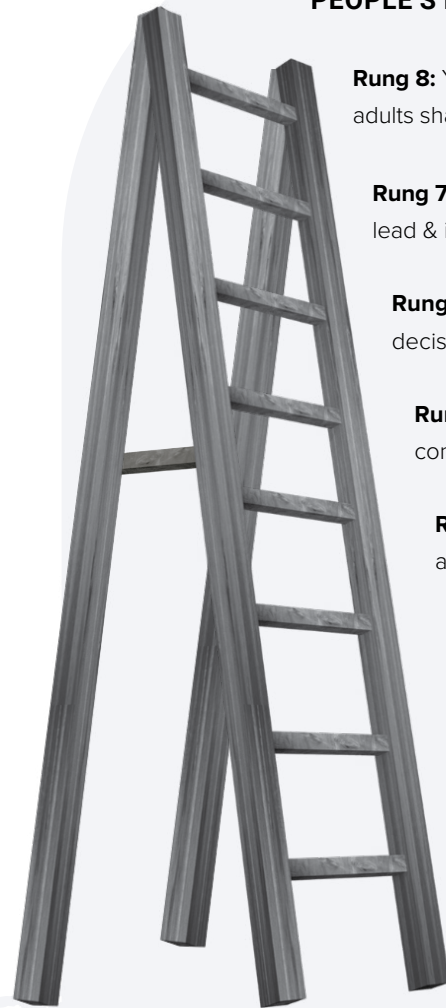
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Hart’s Ladder of Participation

[Hart’s Ladder of Participation](#), a framework developed by sociologist Roger Hart in 1992, illustrates the varying levels of youth engagement facilitated by institutions. The ladder’s rungs represent the degree to which young people are authentically engaged by adults—ranging from minimal involvement at the lower levels to full youth-adult partnership at the higher rungs.

If an institution seeks to foster a culture of collaboration and inclusion, then time, space, and opportunity must be intentionally designed to support those values. All too often, students are placed in performative roles—ushered into meetings with funders or local officials to project an image of engagement without true influence or agency. Hart would categorize this as tokenism, where young people are used to *symbolize* participation rather than *experience* it. In these lower rungs of the ladder, students gain little that contributes to their sense of purpose or belonging. And when students question their abilities, feel isolated, or experience burnout, they may decide to pivot away from their pathways—not due to lack of interest but because of how they were made to feel in that environment.

ROGER HART’S LADDER OF YOUNG PEOPLE’S PARTICIPATION



Rung 8: Young people & adults share decision-making

Rung 7: Young people lead & initiate action

Rung 6: Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people

Rung 5: Young people consulted and informed

Rung 4: Young people assigned and informed

Rung 3: Young people tokenized*

Rung 2: Young people are decoration*

Rung 1: Young people are manipulated*

** Hart explains that the last three rungs are non-participation*

Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). Children’s Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

ADULT CHAMPION REFLECTION #1:

What's My Rung?

Whether you are an after-school program coordinator, a work-based learning facilitator, or an internship supervisor, taking time to reflect on these questions can help you and your organization begin the shift toward authentic, youth-driven practice.

STEP 1:

Using Hart's Ladder as a reference, consider the following questions:

- ▶ *Which rung do I currently see myself—or my institution—occupying?*
- ▶ *What evidence do I have to support this assessment?*
- ▶ *Which rung do I aspire to reach?*
- ▶ *What small, tangible steps can I take to begin moving upward?*

STEP 2:

Ask a young person in your school or institution to answer the **same questions**.

STEP 3:

Take a moment to compare and contrast the two different sets of responses. Engage in a conversation with the young person to better understand their perspective. This might create a new possibility where you and the young person can collaborate toward climbing to a higher rung—together.



Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages



Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

ADULT CHAMPION REFLECTION #2:

Increasing Youth Voice and Agency

If adult collaborators find themselves on the first rung of Hart's Ladder, chances are they are unlikely to reach the top rung by the end of the week—and that's okay. The goal is to take intentional, incremental steps toward deeper youth engagement, climbing your way up the ladder.

Take a moment to reflect on your goal—as principal, dean, classroom instructor, etc.—and the agency you hold. Do you have the ability to create new opportunities for expanded learning that goes beyond the curriculum?

Using the following prompts, explore ways to increase youth agency and adult-youth collaboration:

- ▶ *What is a meaningful area of work that could be owned by a young person?*
- ▶ *If a young person took ownership of this work, what would success look like for you?*
- ▶ *What would success look like for the young person?*
- ▶ *What would success look like for your organization?*

If guidance in choosing a focus area is needed first, start a conversation with a young person by asking:

- ▶ *What's an area of improvement you believe we should prioritize?*
- ▶ *Do you think a young person would be interested in helping lead that change?*
- ▶ *What support would you need from adults to make that happen?*

2

Youth-Adult Co-Creation Framework

The framings and examples shared demonstrate how students can take more of a leadership role in their learning environments—but practitioners should take thoughtful initial steps. The framework below, designed by [The Reinvention Lab/Teach for America](#), can guide educators and others working with youth to decrease “[adultism](#)” and increase shared decision-making. While Hart’s Ladder helps practitioners identify the level of youth engagement they are currently facilitating and the level they aspire to reach, the Youth-Adult Co-Creation Framework provides the tools to close that gap, with actionable steps for building the kind of adult-youth relationships that move meaningfully up the ladder.

PATHWAYS WORK IN PROGRESS: PLANNING FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP

According to Junior Achievement and Ernst & Young LLP, [41 percent of teens would consider entrepreneurship](#) as a career option. While [high school courses and clubs](#) often focus on business ownership, it’s uncommon for [entrepreneurship to be a formal career pathway](#) in high schools. In one op-ed that argues [high schools are stifling entrepreneurship](#), a business founder notes that “even students who enroll in business or entrepreneurship classes aren’t given the time or freedom to tinker with new ideas and projects.” But that doesn’t mean schools can’t teach related skills and introduce students to mindsets that successful entrepreneurs tend to have.

Advance CTE’s [National Career Clusters framework](#) recognizes that the skills developed through entrepreneurship can be applied across all career clusters. Given an evolving labor market, young people should develop a number of durable skills to stay competitive, regardless of the industry they choose to pursue. Young people should have the opportunity to develop these abilities during high school. According to the [Pathsmith](#) framework from America Succeeds, these skills include:

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Mindfulness | 6. Critical Thinking |
| 2. Metacognition | 7. Creativity |
| 3. Leadership | 8. Communication |
| 4. Growth Mindset | 9. Collaboration |
| 5. Fortitude | 10. Character |

Entrepreneurship education provides a pathway for students to not only develop the skills listed above, but to begin making distinct connections between their interests, purpose, and career aspirations.



Framework Activities Breakdown

Shifting Power

- ▶ Use tools like Hart's Ladder to reflect and identify the level of youth engagement you aspire to achieve.
 - ▶ Create and commit to accountability standards that youth and adults will follow throughout.
-

Unlearning Adultism

- ▶ Take the time to understand adultism and identify how it may show up in your interactions with youth.
 - ▶ Encourage youth and adults to show up as their authentic selves without imposing professionalism.
 - ▶ Commit to a practice of reflection at the end of meetings to foster a culture of sense-making.
 - ▶ Make learning *from* and *with* young people your default stance.
-

Building Trust

- ▶ Recognize the importance of consistent transparency and communication, and then establish the best method of communication.
 - ▶ Clearly articulate your goals and measurements of success. Clarity is crucial!
 - ▶ Take the time to have informal conversations, getting to know each other.
-

Honoring the Skills of Young People

- ▶ Encourage youth to identify and use their unique talents.
 - ▶ Use grounded and shared language from the beginning to the end of the project.
 - ▶ Create opportunities to share learnings and insights between youth and adults to deepen connection and buy-in.
-

Reinforcing Co-Creation

- ▶ Before diving into a project, commit to holding time for questions and support requests.
- ▶ Communicate in the ways that are most effective for young people.
- ▶ Commit to making time for co-creation conversations, as well. Consider shifts you'll need to make based on what the young people might need.

PART 2

What Role To Play In Supporting Youth

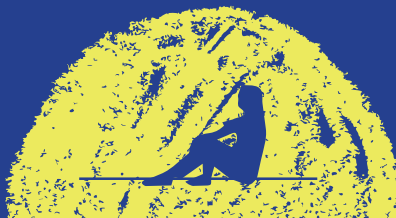


Photo by Allison Shelley for
EDUimages/Altered

“

When one person I looked up to made
me feel like I *belonged*, I felt like I
could achieve so much more.

—
Cammie Allen



[READ CAMMIE'S STORY](#)

Strengthening the Role of Adult Champions

Young people's journeys are deeply influenced by the adults who walk beside them. Unlocking a student's potential means showing up fully in all the ways that matter, offering steady support, academic and real-world guidance, emotional safety, and unwavering advocacy. Effective adult champions intentionally create spaces for connection, growth, and collaboration.

Champions should offer support in identifying what a young person likes, but also what they don't like. In a [2023 Inside Higher Ed survey](#) of current college students, nearly two in 10 said that an internship or experiential learning opportunity helped them realize which tasks or environments were not a good fit. While this may seem like a modest share, these moments of clarity are highly valuable, helping young people make more informed decisions, avoid costly missteps, and refine their direction with greater confidence. Part of learning discovery includes the ability to navigate away from one path and onto another. With quality guidance, a young person can make those necessary adjustments at the most critical times. The following are a variety of roles that adult champions may identify with:

- **Mentor:** A non-familial adult offering consistent support and encouragement, the mentor serves as a positive example for navigating life's challenges, both academic and personal. Mentors can take the role of career guides, connecting youth with field knowledge and a network of professional connections. Mentors can advocate for youth, helping them to have a deeper understanding of opportunities, and resources and tools to navigate challenges. Mentor connections can be established by students, families, or school based adults, by leveraging personal and professional connections, reaching out to community organizations, higher education institutions, local businesses, churches, or networks like rotary clubs. Mentorship is especially impactful as students begin exploring interests and possible futures. Without it, students often rely on narrow and familiar networks, making it important for adults to intentionally help expand who students know and learn from.
- **School-connected adult:** Whether educators, coaches, staff, or administrators, these adults cultivate a sense of belonging for the student body (and likely are viewed as mentors to individuals, too). Their approachability, care, and promotion of a positive school climate reduce risky behaviors and increase overall engagement with school. Day-to-day interactions often determine whether students feel seen and supported. If those connections are inconsistent, schools can strengthen structures like advisory or mentoring systems to ensure every student is known well by at least one adult.



- **Academic motivator:** With a focus on helping students develop essential academic skills, academic motivators (who may be educators, teaching assistants, or staff affiliated with community-based organizations) may assist with schoolwork, study strategies, time management, and goal-setting, all crucial for academic achievement. Moments of struggle or self-doubt are where this support matters most. When it's missing, schools can embed academic encouragement into existing routines—linking coursework more clearly to students' interests and goals.
- **Emotional support/trusted adult:** Whether a social worker, counselor, family member, or other adult, this champion provides a safe space for students to be heard and validated. Trusted adults help with emotional regulation, offer reliability, and act as buffers against stress, mental health issues, and risky behaviors by simply showing they care. Students don't always signal when they need support, especially during transitions or stress. Building trust proactively helps ensure that when challenges arise, someone is already there to listen and respond.
- **Advisor:** Advisors help students plan their post-high school journeys and may be classroom advisors or college counselors. They guide in choosing colleges or vocational training, understanding various opportunities, navigating application processes, and setting long-term goals. Key decision points (course selection, postsecondary planning, transitioning to life after high school) are where guidance matters most. When capacity is limited, schools can share this responsibility across staff and create more structured opportunities for ongoing support.
- **Advocate:** This adult's role is to ensure students have access to necessary resources (mental health, college preparation, extracurriculars, etc.). They defend students' interests within systems like school discipline policies and provide stability during difficult times. Barriers often go unnoticed without someone paying close attention. When no clear advocate is present, schools and families can take a more active role in ensuring students access opportunities—and are supported in speaking up for themselves.

ADULT CHAMPION REFLECTION #3:

What's My Role?

STEP 1:

Using the list of Adult Champions on [pages 30 and 31](#), ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ *Do you see yourself reflected in any of these roles? Multiple roles? If so, list them out.*
- ▶ *Is there a role not listed that you think is important? Take a moment to reflect on that and identify where you may see that role at play.*

STEP 2:

Ask a young person with whom you have a connection to identify what role you play in their life.

- ▶ *They may share something that surprises you. Dig deeper and ask why they see you in that role.*
- ▶ *They may name multiple roles; keep this in your mind as they may see you as a much more important figure than you realize.*
- ▶ *They may say you do not reflect any of the roles listed. This can open the door for a much larger conversation around the types of support they may need from you. Listen.*



3

Mentoring With Purpose: Ideas for Internship Supervisors

Big Picture Learning's [Learning Through Internship \(LTI\) Coordinator Guide](#) provides a comprehensive resource for supporting students through internship experiences. The guide is rooted in the core belief that all high-quality work-based learning should provide young people with robust, relevant interest-driven learning, fostered by supportive adults who care deeply. Suggested strategies focus on project development, meeting structure, and learning goal development. Below are foundational practices for career-connected learning that supervisors should consider when embarking on a healthy mentor/mentee relationship.

A related resource is [BPL's mentorship guide](#), offering additional advice and tools for navigating mentorship, particularly those involving collaborative projects.

... High-quality work-based learning should provide young people with ... learning, fostered by supportive adults who care deeply.

Foundational Practices For Career-Connected Learning

Communication

- ▶ Schedule regular times to meet with the young person.
- ▶ Have regular phone or email contact with the young person's advisor or trusted adult.
- ▶ Contact the advisor or a trusted adult whenever there is a question.

Collaboration

- ▶ Partner with the young person's academic advisor to design a meaningful workplan.
- ▶ Identify common interests between you and the young person.
- ▶ Follow through with plans and be transparent when plans need to shift.
- ▶ Attend school events that support your students' learning.

Organization

- ▶ Plan a work schedule in partnership with the student and advisor.
- ▶ Identify workplace resources and offer flexibility in additional accommodations that might encourage student growth and development.
- ▶ Support the young person with time management tools.
- ▶ Encourage reflection through journaling.

PATHWAYS WORK IN PROGRESS: ADVISING WITH AI

Artificial intelligence, while still in rapid development, clearly will be influential to today's and future generations. One key piece of the Commission's vision on purposeful pathways is thoughtful advising that helps students imagine bigger futures, building connections and taking charge of their education goals and choices. But with school resource realities, it's important that staff and educators with advising roles conduct their work as efficiently as possible. Can AI be used to enhance human-centered, high-quality advising?

According to [Student Support Powered by Artificial + Human Intelligence. AI-Enhanced Advising for Postsecondary Pathways: A Playbook](#) written by the Hybrid Advising Co-op, thoughtful usage of AI can strengthen, not replace, the role of the advisor, expanding their capacity to provide more relevant guidance. AI, the report explains, has the potential to:

Help with the logistical backend of advising. AI tools can help accomplish mundane tasks such as sending/drafting emails, reminders, and comparing times in schedules to meet up. Embedding the technology can offer students the chance to have questions answered at any time of day. AI could also be used to ensure that students can/will follow up with a staff member once they are available, ensuring that proper information is being communicated.

Provide more time for connection. With the tedious aspects of advising out of the way, advisors can spend more time with students, including more impactful and intentional conversations. Time need not be spent on collecting/updating data, but rather advisors can get to know a student on a personal level—growing connections that assist students in taking charge of their education.

Boosting Young People's *Social Capital*: Actions for Adult Champions

The Commission on Purposeful Pathways report delves into research from Commission member Julia Freeland Fisher and others. [Freeland Fisher's work](#) includes takeaways for adult champions on helping youth build social capital. A few recommendations:

- **Identify relationship-focused outcomes at the beginning of program design.** School leaders, for example, can ask themselves how they'll grow students' networks and capture baseline data on student success metrics. This involves knowing relationships students already have within reach and allows for data-driven, personalized strategies for increasing access to networks. Adults should also ensure students have [awareness of the relationships they have](#) that could help them accomplish their goals.
- **Measure all the dimensions of social capital.** When looking at existing relationships, adults should consider quantity and quality, as well as how networks are structured and the ability to mobilize relationships. This information will provide deep insights into whether and how schools are supporting students holistically.
- **Encourage students to expand the depth and breadth of their social capital.** Doing so helps open up choices and opportunities through more advice, jobs, and learning experiences. Part of this involves empowering students to [lead conversations](#) within their support networks—individually but also perhaps as part of a quarterly “dream team” meeting to provide updates on the support they're getting and progress toward goals.
- **Track how student networks are evolving over time.** Having this insight will help schools provide *all* students with the ability to harness opportunities that lead to a fulfilled and successful life.



A Tool for Analyzing the Impact of a School or Organization's Work

Youth engagement helps young people to obtain the key learning outcomes of purpose, belonging, and social capital. This list of reflective questions, based on [KnowledgeWorks'](#) student voice work, should serve as a guiding primer to help analyze existing efforts and call out how a school or organization can make an even bigger impact.

Youth engagement helps young people to obtain the key learning outcomes of *purpose*, *belonging*, and *social capital*.



Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages/Altered

Guiding Questions

Reflect on *Purpose*

- ▶ How clearly does our current curriculum or program structure connect a student’s stated personal interests and passions?
 - ▶ What intentional, scaffolded experiences do we provide to help students gain clarity on their postsecondary journey?
 - ▶ Are we actively gathering student feedback to ensure that coursework is perceived as intellectually rigorous, challenging, and personally interesting?
-

Reflect on *Belonging*

- ▶ How do we ensure that every student has a consistent, adult mentor or “champion”?
 - ▶ In what ways do we foster a strong, supportive peer leadership community and encourage young adults to pursue their interests authentically?
 - ▶ How are we integrating support for students with disabilities and other diverse learners?
-

Reflect on *Social Capital*

- ▶ What specific mechanisms are we using to bridge the gap between students’ existing social networks and a diverse, wide range of supportive adult professionals?
- ▶ Do we explicitly teach young people the “how-to” skills required to activate these networks?
- ▶ Do our career-connected learning experiences provide genuine opportunities to build trusted relationships with adults?

Engagement Spotlights

The process of helping high school students achieve clarity and build a strategic pathway toward their postsecondary goals—whether those include college, career training, or direct entry into the workforce—is most successful when integrated into the core learning experience. Beginning on [page 39](#) are three student engagement models that support student journeys.

KEY FINDINGS FROM STUDENT GROUPS

The themes below represent broader feelings young people have expressed as related to specific student engagement experiences. These young people represent rural, urban, and suburban communities from California, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Washington.

Internships: Students highly value internships and real-world experiences (e.g., exposure to fields like landscaping, mechanics, real estate, fashion, welding, firefighting) as they build skills, confidence, and connections that could lead to future job opportunities. Career-exploration opportunities through guest speakers and connections with professionals who could become mentors are also valuable.

Advising and adult support: Students view advisors as deeply trusted figures who act as both teachers and friends. They provide essential academic, personal, and career guidance, helping students engage in opportunities and offering tailored support for diverse post secondary pathways (college, trades, entrepreneurship, etc.).

Skill-building and personal growth: Students have a strong desire to strengthen emotional intelligence and stress management. Participants in student engagement programs (such as College Access Research & Action’s Peer to Peer Program) develop critical durable skills—like responsibility, punctuality, emotional regulation, teamwork, communication, empathy, public speaking, and problem-solving—through hands-on learning and peer leadership roles.

School culture and belonging: A supportive, community-focused school environment fosters a sense of belonging, purpose, and self-discovery. Programs that emphasize learning in the community and peer leadership contribute to this positive culture.

Motivation and future planning: Students are often motivated by family role models and passions (music, art, hands-on work, etc.). Engagement programs, including those highlighted in this report, help connect student interests to tangible academic or career paths. Students also value flexible pathways beyond traditional four-year colleges.



Photo by Joshua Poyer/The Youth Advisory Group

READ THE STUDENT STORIES

[READ LOVELL'S STORY](#)

[READ LATOYA'S STORY](#)

[READ CAMMIE'S STORY](#)



4

College Access Research & Action (CARA): Right to College Program

A peer-to-peer model that leverages student voice to develop and deepen a “college- and career-going culture” in high school.

Through this initiative, 11th and 12th-grade youth leaders guide their peers through postsecondary exploration and the college application process—bridging the postsecondary guidance gap. It has been especially impactful for first-generation college students, low-income students, and students of color. Youth Leaders receive 70 or more hours of comprehensive training in college access content so they’re equipped to assist their peers. Done with supervision, the work often occurs through Student Success Centers located on multi-school or large campuses and run by community-based organizations in partnership with the schools they serve.

It has been especially impactful for first-generation college students, low-income students, and students of color.

PROGRAM DATA POINTS

130

PEER LEADERS

Over 130 trained Peer Leaders for the Right to College program, and more than 1,500 trained by CARA programs in total

+11%

11 percentage points higher college persistence among CARA-trained Peer Leaders compared to academically and demographically similar peers

40

LOCATIONS

Programs hosted in 40 different locations

Sources: [CARA Right to College](#) and [By the Numbers](#)



Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

In a focus group with CARA Youth Leaders, Big Picture Learning staff asked about why they had joined, their interests, training and responsibilities, skills they developed, challenges they experienced, and how the program shaped their future plans. A number of themes about authentic student engagement emerged:

- ▶ **Connections between interests and careers:** Peer Leaders helped others navigate the college search process, college systems, career pathway opportunities, counseling and communication about college, and paying for college. Events led by Peer Leaders have included college access workshops and career exploration events.
- ▶ **Peer support and mentorship:** Students relied on each other for help, and mentors played a significant role in their motivation and guidance. This helps to create a culture of belonging, as students feel they have reliable supports they can access as they navigate postsecondary options.
- ▶ **Skill development and personal growth:** The program facilitated the development of communication, empathy, leadership, and other skills, while boosting confidence and self-awareness. Leader training covered, among other topics, post secondary mythbusting, goal setting, counseling skills, and college search and application process support.
- ▶ **Positive Impact on school culture:** The student-led initiative created a more supportive, inclusive, and college-focused environment.
- ▶ **Decrease in challenges and fears:** With the support of peer leaders, students faced and overcame various challenges, including social anxiety, time management issues, and fear of inadequacy, demonstrating resilience and adaptability.
- ▶ **Long-term value:** Peer leaders emphasized that the program's value went beyond financial compensation, playing a role in personal development, community building, and positive change within their schools.

5

New Tech Network (NTN)

An organization deeply committed to real-world, project-based learning

A national nonprofit dedicated to driving systemic transformation within K-12 education, New Tech Network seeks to change how educational reform occurs. The aim is to equip all students for postsecondary achievement by collaborating with district leaders, school principals, and classroom educators. This level of partnership allows NTN to co-design customized approaches tailored to the specific needs of each school they serve.

The NTN model recognizes each student as a whole person with unique interests, strengths, and aspirations. Students engage in personalized, project-based learning that connects to their interests. They work in small learning teams, collaborate with peers and mentors, and engage in meaningful reflection while building social connections through authentic work and external partnerships.

An example of this work shows up at [Aiken New Tech High School](#) in Cincinnati, where a garden initiative has evolved into a [student-led agricultural business](#), in part because the neighborhood had no grocery store after a Kroger location shuttered. The initiative reflects nationwide trends in school gardens and student-designed businesses—plus shows how student interests can transform and have a deep community impact.

Students maintain their school garden while learning Biology, Chemistry, and Physics through a “Food Science” curriculum as well as running a thriving business. Partnerships with La Soupe, an organization that turns surplus food into ready-made meals for food insecure families, and local coffee producer La Terza turn the school’s produce into healthy and sustainable meal options for the community. Students actively engage with professionals through these collaborations, which includes learning to make healthy meals with fresh produce. Aiken students now see agriculture as a legitimate career path due to their hands-on learning and increased social capital through partnership collaboration.

PROGRAM DATA POINTS

+8%

COLLEGE PERSISTENCE

82% of NTN student college persistence, compared to national average of 74%

+10%

GRADUATION RATE

95% graduation rate from NTN schools, compared to the national high school average of 85%

31% | 48% | 21%
SUBURBAN | URBAN | RURAL

Diverse network of schools represented, with 31% suburban, 48% urban and 21% rural communities

Source: [New Tech Network Impact report](#)

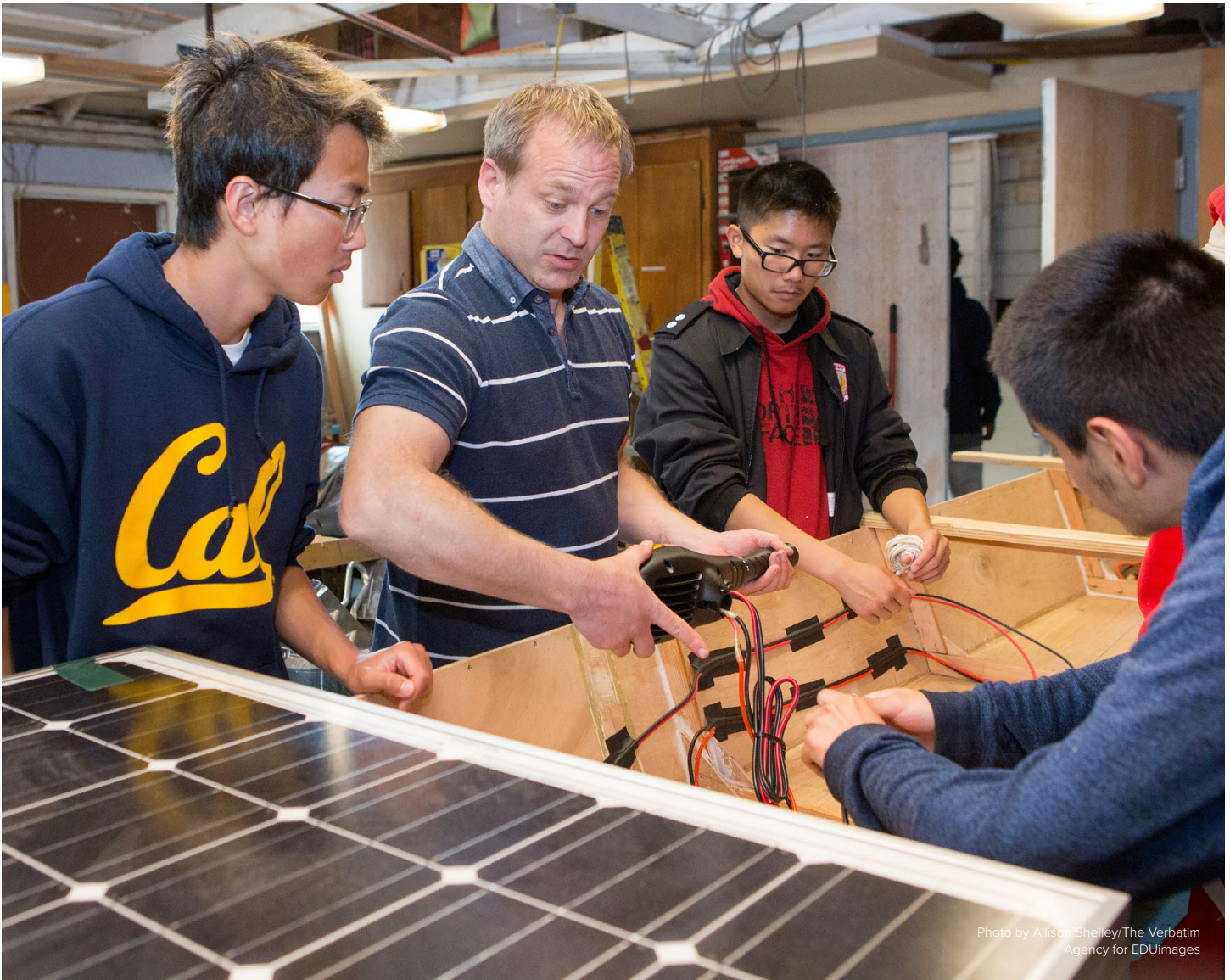


Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

Key Program Design Takeaways

- ▶ **Develop a framework.** NTN's whole-school transformation model is built on four design pillars: culture, instruction, assessment, and technology. This framework helps schools adopt a learner-centered, project-based approach.
- ▶ **Identify the outcomes.** Five research-based learning outcomes—knowledge and thinking, collaboration, agency, oral communication, and written communication—scaffold students toward post secondary readiness.
- ▶ **Scale up.** NTN's schools utilize project planning toolkits, rubrics, and a learning-management system to move from single-classroom change to system-wide innovation.

The NTN model recognizes each student as a whole person with unique interests, strengths, and aspirations.

6

Johanna Echols-Hansen (JEH) Continuation High School | Cloverdale, CA

Serving students who haven't received the learning they desire from traditional schools and need a more flexible schedule

“

When I started working with my mentor, I realized that what I want to do actually matters. It's not just something for school, it's something I can build a life around.

—JEH STUDENT

JEH, a Big Picture Learning school, caters to juniors and seniors, aged 16 and older, who have struggled in traditional high school settings and require more flexible scheduling. The school's approach is deeply personalized, focusing on each student's unique interests, talents, and needs, extending beyond academics to a more holistic view of their development. At the core of JEH's structure are advisors, who are hired to build strong relationships with groups of students over the course of their high school experience. Advisors also help individuals discover their interests, connect with relevant internships, and develop their broader learner journeys.

In a focus group with current students from JEH, BPL staff asked about post secondary dreams, how their school is helping them prepare for the future, ideas for strengthening student engagement, and how they would describe their experiences with advising and advanced coursework opportunities. The following themes emerged:

- ▶ **Internships and mentorships are life-changing:** They provide not only technical skills but also networks, confidence, and pathways to stable jobs.
- ▶ **Advisors are linchpins:** Students rely on them for academic, personal, and career guidance, blending care with accountability.
- ▶ **Emotional growth matters:** Young people want to improve self-management and interpersonal skills just as much as career skills.
- ▶ **Choice and flexibility empower students:** Dual enrollment, hands-on learning, and personalized pathways give them ownership of their futures.
- ▶ **Belonging fuels purpose:** Students who once felt adrift now see school as a supportive community that helps them define their goals.
- ▶ **Resources remain a barrier:** Funding constraints threaten programs that directly support student success and engagement.



Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

Schools operate within different constraints and contexts, but many of the principles behind JEH's personalized approach are widely applicable. Consider the following questions, developed with input from students.

- How might school counselors or administrators assigned to students for all four years of high school be more aware of student interests and offer suggestions for related experiential learning?
- What programming could be offered, or integrated into curricula, for students to improve their self-management and interpersonal skills? Can students be involved in this effort?
- How can dual enrollment offerings be expanded to offer students more choice? What additional subjects might students want?
- What interventions could be put in place to help struggling students identify their goals and feel more supported in reaching them?
- How can educators and school leaders recognize when the educational experience being provided is not sufficient for a particular student, and when that's the case what alternative learning approach might better serve the student?
- What can be done to help students develop the language and ability needed to advocate for their learning if the current situation is not meeting their needs?
- What additional steps do students think could help in providing a more supportive school climate?



Experience Snapshot

A student in this focus group recalled how a single experience shifted his learning journey. As a student who found traditional education quite challenging, Chris (who requested his first name be used only) was completely disengaged and headed down a dangerous path. He transferred to JEH for a fresh start.

There, monthly guest speakers were invited to share their career stories. Chris attended one of these sessions and became interested in a speaker who ran a landscaping business. Chris' advisor encouraged him to connect with the speaker afterwards which he did, nervously. As a result, he was able to secure a job shadow day that would later evolve into a full blown internship. Today, Chris continues to intern at the landscaping business, and has developed a deep relationship with his mentor and has a full-time offer awaiting him upon his graduation.

Call to Action

This playbook has laid out a number of challenges, stories, and resources to consider in supporting young people as they pursue purposeful pathways. Ideally, the conditions that surround them should nurture all that's possible. Consider the following actions, intentionally designed to mirror the Activation Tips on [Page 8](#):

Ready to take action to support young people in pursuing purposeful pathways?

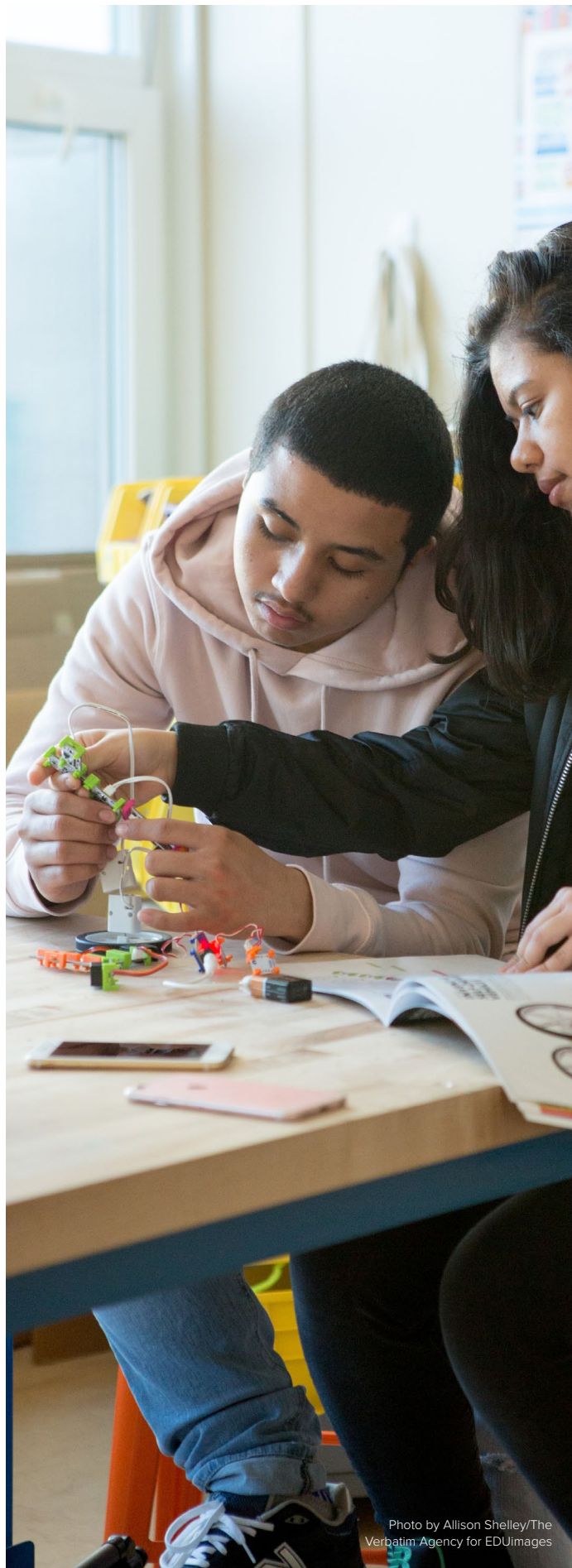


Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

Action Tips

Teachers

Focus on using the playbook to deepen the role of educators as champions for students—particularly as an academic motivator and a trusted adult.

- ▶ Consider integrating engagement models like Hart’s Ladder to develop a culture of collaboration.
- ▶ Engage with the reflection prompts throughout this guide to help identify growth and learning opportunities for your pedagogy.
- ▶ Organize exhibitions and panels that center student interests but are aligned with competencies and learning goals.

Counselors

Focus on using the playbook to examine your positioning with young people in individual pathways work.

- ▶ Audit your advising practice honestly. Are students leaving conversations with greater clarity and agency, or with a plan that adults designed for them?
- ▶ Identify which of your curricular resources were built without student input and prioritize refreshing those first, centering students’ actual interests and curiosities rather than assumed ones.
- ▶ Treat every key decision point—course selection, postsecondary planning, the transition out of high school—as an opportunity for deep student participation and learning.

School & System Leaders

Focus on using the playbook as a culture change tool.

- ▶ Audit your school’s structures for belonging, purpose, and social capital using the reflection questions in [Section V](#).
- ▶ Make it a non-negotiable that every student is known well by at least one consistent adult. If your current structures can’t guarantee that, redesign them until they can.
- ▶ Compensate students who participate in co-design and working groups. Recognizing young people as expert collaborators means treating them like one.

For Families

Focus on the playbook as a window into what purposeful pathways look like and how you can actively support your learner’s exploration rather than defaulting to familiar career tracks.

- ▶ Conduct a Career Inventory Audit of your own family or team to identify what careers are in closest proximity to your child that might be of interest to them. Consider the Search Institute’s [Developmental Relationships Framework](#) or Education Strategy Group’s [Social Capital Individual Student Plan](#) as potential starting points.
- ▶ Actively engage with your child’s school to learn about advanced coursework opportunities and career-connected offerings.
- ▶ Begin career talks as early as middle school. The sooner you start the conversations, the sooner the exploration can begin.

Students

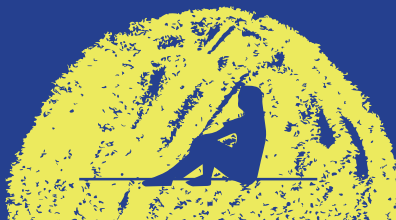
Focus on using this playbook as a tool to take a more active role in shaping your learning and future pathways.

- ▶ Don’t wait to be invited into decisions that affect your education. Ask your teachers, advisors, and school leaders how you can have a real role in shaping your learning experience.
- ▶ Tell the adults in your life what you actually care about. The more specific you are about your interests and goals, the better they can connect you to opportunities that matter.
- ▶ Expand who you know, intentionally. Your future will be shaped as much by your relationships as by your grades. Invest in building a network of adults who can open doors and offer honest & meaningful guidance.

“

Education is the most important aspect that shapes a young person's future. Why aren't they trusted to hold the torches that light their way?

—
LATOYA BEECHAM, GRADUATE, HERO HIGH SCHOOL (BRONX, NY), YOUTH ADVISOR TO THIS PLAYBOOK



[READ LATOYA'S STORY](#)

Endnote & Acknowledgments

This playbook was made possible by support from the Gates Foundation, in partnership with Education First.

The young people featured in this playbook—and countless others like them across the country—are not waiting to be handed a future. Here’s how they collectively express where they stand:

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We are ready, right now, to help shape what learning looks like and where it leads. What we need are supportive adults willing to share the table, structures that make space for our voices, and learning experiences that reflect who we are and where we want to go.

Co-creation is not an add-on to strong pathway work. It is what makes it meaningful in the first place. When students are treated as partners in designing their own education, the outcomes extend far beyond academics. Students begin to see themselves with greater clarity, feel a deeper sense of belonging, and build relationships that open doors long after graduation.

The work ahead is not simple, and the conditions will not always be ideal. But each step we take together—young people and adults—toward a more authentic partnership brings us closer to a future where purposeful pathways are not the exception, but the expectation.

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Special Thanks to Students and Staff at:

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The Commission’s Vision: All students experience high-quality advising, accelerated coursework, and career-connected learning that cultivate purpose, belonging, and social capital—ensuring that they graduate high school with agency and momentum on purposeful pathways toward economic mobility.

Learn more and explore additional resources from the Commission:

-  [A Launchpad for Life](#)
-  [High-Impact Practices Action Guide](#)
-  [Enabling Conditions Action Guide](#)
-  [Measurement Action Guide](#)