

School and Community Career Pathways Models for Building Social Capital

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Key Points

- Students are disappointed that their educational experiences are not preparing them for good jobs, and employers complain they are unable to fill the jobs they have.
- A central answer to both problems may be constructing school and community career pathways partnership models that integrate schools and students with employers and work.
- These models create new ways that K–12 education can develop an individual’s talents to his or her full potential, increasing that person’s ability to pursue opportunity over a lifetime.

From 1910 to 1940, a grassroots effort in America called the high school movement led to a “spectacular educational transformation” in this country.¹ Enrollment of 18-year-olds grew from 19 percent to 71 percent, and graduation rates rose from 9 percent to more than 50 percent—lifting the US to the forefront of educational attainment in the world.

Even still, consumer data today from Gallup and Strada Education Network show that students are disappointed that their educational experiences are not preparing them for good jobs, and employers complain they are unable to fill the jobs they have.²

One possible answer to both problems may lie in what seems to be a new high school movement: constructing school and community career pathways partnership models that integrate schools and students with employers and work. This approach creates new forms of social capital for young people by developing relationships that expand their community

networks and lifetime access to opportunity and prepare them for life, work, and responsible citizenship.

Relationships are resources that can lead to developing and accumulating human capital and opportunity networks that are key to unlocking social mobility and opportunity. Many schools already foster the development of students’ *bonding social capital* (creating group networks that not only satisfy the need to be with others like ourselves but also provide personal emotional support, companionship, and validation). What schools do not always succeed at is helping students build *bridging social capital* (connections with individuals different than ourselves that expand knowledge, social circles, and resources across race, class, and religion). As Xavier de Souza Briggs says, bonding social capital is for “getting by,” and bridging social capital is for “getting ahead” or “import clout.”³

Conservatives should support expanding school and community career pathways partnership models to allow students to build the kind of bridging social capital necessary to unlock social mobility and become productive workers while in school.

A Pathways Partnership Expansion Framework

The Pathways to Prosperity Network, an alliance of more than 60 regional pathway programs across the country, has identified four aspects of career-focused pathway programs that should guide the expansion of these programs.

Sequenced Academic Curriculum. Programs should include requirements aligned with labor market needs (i.e., supply and demand in the community), a timeline guiding young people, and a genuine student career credential.

Introducing Students to Work and Careers No Later Than Middle School. Students should start with activities such as guest speakers and field trips in middle school and then move to career exposure in high school through mentorships, internships, and working in an occupation. Work-based learning experience should be integrated into classroom discussions and challenge young people with real-world tasks that help them understand labor market demands. Discussions should include academic and technical knowledge and the “soft skills” needed for a career.

The Indispensable Role of Employers, Industry Associations, and Other Mediating Institutions. Employers and their affiliates must set program standards and define the skills and competencies students need to attain a certificate and employment. They should provide paid apprenticeships offering work experience and assist in assessing a young person’s employment readiness. Other community groups should assist with convening, organizing, and planning and provide program and work placement navigation and social support services for students (and their families). Examples of intermediaries include community foundations, community colleges, chambers of commerce, private industry councils, the Salvation Army, and United Way.

Policy Leaders’ Key Role in These Programs. Policies at the local, state, and federal levels create the framework that facilitates program expansion. The policy framework includes executive orders and directives by federal, state, or local governance entities. For example, a policy creating incentives for K–12, postsecondary, labor, and workforce groups to integrate distinct funding streams would allow for a new approach to financial support for pathways programs.

Partnership Model Examples

Career pathways partnership models can be structured in many ways in the above framework. Here are five.

District, Charter, and University Partnerships. Wiseburn Unified School District in Los Angeles County and its partner Da Vinci Charter School have more than 100 business and nonprofit partners offering students programs—including internships, mentorships, workshops, boot camps, and consultancies—with student mental health and counseling services. Students can also pursue associate or bachelor’s degree programs through University of California, Los Angeles, Extension; El Camino College; or College for America.

In Boston, Match Charter Public School, in partnership with Duet and Southern New Hampshire University, assists students with college completion and career placement, including student coaching and mentoring and accredited associate and bachelor’s degrees. The program includes comprehensive career services such as job searches and support through the hiring process for up to two years after graduation.

Catholic Schools and Corporate Partnerships. Cristo Rey is a network of 35 Catholic high schools in 22 states serving low-income, mostly minority students that integrates four years of academics with work experience through its Corporate Work Study Program. This nonprofit placement service works with more than 3,400 partners to situate students five days a month in an entry-level professional job. Students earn 60 percent of tuition through employment, with the balance coming from fundraising and a small family contribution.

Public-Private Partnerships. The Atlanta business community, Fulton County Schools, and Junior Achievement created a public-private partnership called 3-D Education. This project-based learning approach includes a six-week case study beginning in 11th grade that pairs students with coaches in off-campus industrial and professional settings.

Citywide Partnerships. In New Orleans, the education, business, and civic partnership YouthForce NOLA works with open enrollment charter high schools, offering career exposure and work experiences, soft-skills training, coaching for students, and paid student internships for seniors. This is followed by 90 hours of work placement in a career pathway with opportunities including biology and health sciences, digital media and information technology, and skilled crafts such as architecture and water management. It also has a family engagement program educating parents about the career pathways program.

Private Enterprise. In Indianapolis, Kenzie Academy is a venture-funded technology and apprenticeship program for students from varying backgrounds, including high school graduates, formerly incarcerated individuals, and those with master's degrees seeking new occupational opportunities. Students apprentice in Kenzie Studio, the company's consulting arm. To make the \$24,000-a-year program

accessible, students have an income share agreement delaying that payment until they have a job paying at least \$40,000. Kenzie Academy partners with Butler University so students can receive a certificate from both organizations.

Conclusion

The 20th-century high school movement created a remarkable educational transformation in America. Today, we can advance a new high school movement that treats schools as formative institutions that build social capital for young people by integrating students with employers and work.

Programs like those detailed above help young people develop an occupational identity and vocational self that leads to adult success and a lifetime of opportunity. They place student activity, engagement, relationship building, and networking at the center of their design and use different approaches to develop habits of mind and habits of association in young people. They create new ways that K–12 education can develop an individual's talents to his or her full potential, increasing that person's ability to pursue opportunity over a lifetime. Finally, they catalyze the creation of high-opportunity communities. School and community career pathways partnership models ought to be replicated in more school districts, charter schools, and public-private settings.

About the Author

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Notes

1. Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, *The Race Between Education and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), https://www.amazon.com/Race-between-Education-Technology-dp-0674028678/dp/0674028678/ref=mt_hardcover?_encoding=UTF8&me=&qid=
2. Strada Education Network and Gallup, "Back to School? What Adults Without Degrees Say About Pursuing Additional Education and Training," September 22, 2019, <https://www.stradaeducation.org/report/back-to-school/>.

3. Xavier de Souza Briggs, “Should College Freshmen Pick Their Roommates?,” Social Capital Blog, September 2, 2010, <https://socialcapital.wordpress.com/tag/xavier-de-souza-briggs/>.

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