



RESEARCH REPORT

Making Education and Employment Work for High School Students

A Toolkit for Systems That Support Young People with Adult Responsibilities, with Benefits for All

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June 2020



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Acknowledgments

This report was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/funding-principles.

We also want to extend our sincere thanks to the many experts in education and employment who lent their expertise, reviewed this document, and helped it reach the right stakeholders. Please see appendix A for a full list of these experts.

Preface

This toolkit was written before the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic in the United States, but it remains more important than ever to conversations about how schools and employment should evolve to better support young people in their transition to adulthood.

With unemployment at the highest levels in recent history, families across the country are scrambling to make ends meet. In many families, young people of high school age are part of the solution: they step up to cobble together resources they and their families need, they watch younger siblings so their parents can pick up extra work shifts, and they help manage their households. There will be even more pressure on teens in mixed-status households that do not qualify for unemployment or stimulus money because at least one member is undocumented.

Playing these roles is difficult for teens and can make it challenging to balance these responsibilities with the competing demands of traditional high school. Teens can miss too many school days, fall behind in course credits, and fail classes in large part because schools do not provide adequate flexibility and support. Students also need opportunities to align paid work with their education so that earning a paycheck does not require them to trade-off long-term career prospects. Without more adaptive policies and practices, mainstream schools essentially force students out or into “alternative” systems, and only after students are already in acute distress.

The pandemic has presented not only challenges but also incredible opportunities to reinvent how we think about education. Overnight, schools were exploring new ways to support learning for all students (e.g., online classes, take-home work); providing asynchronous learning opportunities in which students can engage at any time that works for them; focusing on proficiency, skills, and knowledge rather than time in class; figuring out new ways to keep in touch with students and parents outside the school building; and ultimately having to rethink the fundamentals of credit hours and school funding.

Many schools and programs featured in this toolkit were already grappling with these issues before the pandemic—reinventing how our mainstream schools support not only working teens but also many teens who face unique challenges fitting into a rigid traditional school environment. In an ideal world, school systems across the country would have access to these best practices and learn from their experiences to craft new strategies during and after this pandemic.

Many unanswered questions exist about how we ensure these innovations work and provide adequate support, particularly for students with limited access to technology or conditions at home that

are not conducive to learning. After the COVID-19 pandemic, such innovations may or may not be necessary, appropriate, or cost-effective for all students.

However, we are hopeful that schools can emerge from these extraordinary circumstances with stronger will and capacity to serve students who need more support and flexibility to succeed.

Why We Need This Toolkit

In recent years, Urban Institute research has drawn attention to the important roles that youth as young as 12 years old often play in families with few resources and in an economy where family poverty has risen, wages have stagnated, and federal benefits have become increasingly limited.

In Urban's *Impossible Choices* study, we learned that parents try their best to protect their teens, but **teens feel compelled to step up and take on adult economic responsibilities** (Popkin et al. 2016). First, they try to look for a conventional job. If they cannot find one, they try to make money under the table (e.g., selling candy, styling hair, doing odd jobs), and if they cannot make enough money doing those things, they find other ways to earn money that may put them at risk for involvement with the justice system. They also care for siblings, provide translation and interpretation for parents, and play other important roles in their families.

Young people's contributions matter. For example, working teens ages 16 to 18 who drop out typically contribute 22 percent of their households' income (Scott 2015). This helps lift 42 percent of these households above the poverty level and significantly lessens their housing-cost burden.

These young people clearly demonstrate many of the qualities we want to see in all teens: responsibility, initiative, problem-solving, resilience, time management, and adaptability. Many of them are also actively cultivating competencies on the job and at home that their peers may not have. These qualities and skills are precisely the ones that employers say they want from their talent, and the ones we need in future citizens.

Yet our educational systems often do not adequately value these young people and can make it incredibly difficult for them to stay on track in school. The great challenge is to figure out how we can adapt educational and workforce systems to support youth better.

Designing more flexible and supportive systems is fundamentally an issue of equity and fairness. Young people with adult economic responsibilities usually come from families with low incomes and are disproportionately students of color.

Further, the systems changes needed to better value and support these teens can make education and employment more humane for all high school students and of higher value for all of us. This outcome is like the "curb-cut effect," documented when cities started making street corners more accessible for disabled residents—a relatively small group—and found that it benefited not only people in wheelchairs, but also parents with strollers, shoppers with carts, children on bikes, and many others.¹

Strong universal design has the power to destigmatize alternative solutions, make them more accessible to everyone, and yield a stronger, more resilient generation of high school graduates for our communities and workplaces.

To better understand what systems change might look like, we convened numerous experts to learn about promising practices in four key domains:

1. identifying young people with adult responsibilities;
2. making educational systems more flexible and supportive;
3. better aligning career and technical education (CTE) with paid work opportunities; and
4. improving access to employment for teens.

Experts included professionals from secondary education, workforce development, and the employer community, as well as policymakers and scholars with federal, state, and local perspectives. We supplemented these conversations with a scan of current literature and policies, as well as strategic follow-up interviews. Experts are listed at the end of this toolkit.

This toolkit is the result of this process. For each of the four key domains, we first describe the status quo, its shortcomings and underlying issues. We then give examples of **innovative models** that might help policymakers and practitioners rethink what is possible. Next, we provide some insights into the **policies and supports** that may be needed to support these innovations. Finally, we describe the ways in which these types of innovations can benefit not only the subgroup of students dealing with adult responsibilities, but also the broader student population, in hopes that this will also help policymakers and advocates make the case for needed policy changes.

Identifying and Supporting Young People at School

Schools cannot help or support young people if staff and faculty do not know them, their struggles, and their strengths. Conditions in local middle and high schools are often not conducive to knowing enough about teens to intervene before they get too far off track.

Experts point to numerous critical problems:

- **Overburdened counselors.** School counselors can play a significant role in almost every aspect of a student's life from adjusting course schedules to helping navigate family dynamics. However, while the recommended ratio of counselors to students is 1:250, in practice this ratio shapes up to be 1:482, nearly double the recommended ratio (NACAC and ASCA 2015).
- **Compliance and truancy focus.** Young people with adult responsibilities often miss a lot of school. Many school systems take a compliance approach to attendance issues and focus on enforcing mandatory attendance and punishing students with suspensions or expulsions or even legal action, ultimately further alienating students and pushing them out of school.
- **Too little, too late.** Many school systems identify students who are struggling and offer flexible educational options or other types of support only once these students are failing multiple classes, have severe attendance problems, or have already dropped out of school. At this point, young people have often fallen so behind that it is much more difficult for them to get on track again.

Innovative Solutions

Luckily, there are many different strategies schools could use to overcome these challenges and reverse the status quo.

- **Proactively monitor chronic absence to establish early interventions.** Across the country, more than 8 million students are missing so many days of school that they are academically at risk (Bauer et al. 2018). Organizations such as Attendance Works explain that chronic absence is not as simple as truancy or skipping school. According to a 2017 Education Commission of the States (ECS) report, chronic absenteeism is most prevalent among students in poverty,

students with disabilities, students of color, students who move frequently, and students who are involved in the juvenile justice system (Rafa 2017). A chronic-absence approach to attendance takes into account all absences, both excused and unexcused, and helps emphasize the academic impact of missed days and look for positive, early-intervention solutions for young people that are fundamentally about systems change. School staff then follow up with letters, phone calls, and conferences, which are not interventions themselves but rather mechanisms for building relationships and understanding the underlying causes of absenteeism so that meaningful interventions can be implemented.

- **Field universal student screenings.** In an ideal world, schools would screen all middle and high school students annually for markers of adult responsibilities and other measures to better triage student needs and calibrate the resources needed to address them. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) provides examples of needs assessments that counselors could use to survey or screen students that might serve as a starting place.² However, in these assessments schools would need to deliberately ask questions about adult responsibilities and students' need for paid employment to assess what flexibilities their school needs (see next section). Typically, student or youth needs assessments do not ask such questions because of mainstream assumptions that they are irrelevant to middle or high school students. Screening may also be an opportunity to ask about both student interests and competencies to more readily link them to high-value opportunities (see subsequent section on "Aligning Career and Technical Education (CTE) with Paid Work-Based Learning").
- **Establish caring-adult strategies beyond traditional counselor support during school hours.** Counselors cannot do this work by themselves, and it is unlikely that schools would have the funding needed in the short to medium term to have the number of counselors, psychologists, and other professionals needed to tackle these challenges. However, schools can be deliberate about enlisting their staff—teachers, support staff, administration, and so on—to build positive relationships with students and give them warm handoffs to more specialized supports. See box 1 for examples of what some educational systems are doing.
- **Foster community connections.** Even under the best circumstances, schools may not have the capacity or expertise to provide the supports that young people dealing with adult responsibilities need. Consequently, schools and their students can benefit from partnerships with nonprofit organizations and government agencies. There are many different models for what this might look like, ranging from full-fledged community schools to much narrower collaborations focused on mentoring, counseling, or other family support.³ For young people

with adult responsibilities, the key to engagement may be making sure to embed supports in the school day and/or providing various modalities for interaction and support (Facetime, WhatsApp, text, phone), rather than depending on in-person after-school programs.

BOX 1

Creating School Cultures of Caring, Trusted Adults Who Know Their Students

In our conversations with experts, we identified different models specifically designed to enhance the quality of relationships between school staff and students.

- The Greeley-Evans School District in Colorado uses a simple two-by-ten strategy. For ten days, staff members spend two minutes a day talking to students who they've identified as falling under the radar to learn more about them and who they are. As staff learn more about students' circumstances, they use a warm handoff to counselors to address issues, which may include schedule modifications (see next section) or other supports.
- The Californians for Justice Initiative advocates for a model of "Relationship-Centered Schools." To help students stay on track to graduate, building strong institutions that value student voices, investing in staff members, and creating space for relationship building are essential. The model ensures staff capacity is met because an investment in staff is an investment in students. Californians for Justice provides ongoing capacity building and one-time trainings for school and district leaders to improve their practices around relationships and racial equity, as well as student and family engagement. Many of their trainings are co-led by youth leaders, creating a unique and powerful experience for participants because they hear directly from the students.
- The New York City Community Schools Initiative (NYC-CS) uses real time attendance and other data to help identify which students need to be proactively connected to a caring adult through its Success Mentor program and other strategies.^a

Source: ^a William R. Johnston, John Engberg, Isaac M. Opper, Lisa Sontag-Padilla, and Lea Xenakis, "What Is the Impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative?" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020).

Policy Recommendations

Innovative practices cannot flourish without the support of their surrounding systems. Experts suggested various federal and state policies that could help foster the quality ecosystem needed to test and scale ways of better identifying and supporting young people with adult responsibilities.

Here's how the **federal** Department of Education can lead the way:

- **Integrate whole-child metrics in federal reporting.** Educators across the nation are working to improve their students' academic achievement. A whole-child approach⁴ to education expands the focus from achievement to securing long-term development and success of all children. Having a greater understanding of each student's social and emotional learning provides educators with insights into how they may need to calibrate their approaches. Asking states and local schools to report whole-child metrics⁵ in required federal reporting⁶ may encourage them to move toward using more universal student screenings and assessments.
- **Allow greater flexibility for how federal education dollars can be spent.** States and school districts are often highly restricted in terms of how they can spend federal dollars. The Department of Education could consider allowing them to use federal dollars to partner or match resources with local nonprofits or government agencies that might provide enhanced supports and services to families and young people. The federal government should also make sure these kinds of entities can receive federal grant dollars earmarked for innovation.

Here's how **state** governments can also provide important leadership:

- **Invest state funding in support staff.** Staff support for youth has largely hinged on what teachers can provide in the classroom. Increasing budgets to adequately fund other responsibilities, such as mental health service providers and social workers in schools, would support schools in achieving better outcomes and mitigate teacher and staff burnout.
- **Adjust school-funding formulas.** Many states calculate school funding based on enrollment or average daily attendance. This funding formula may penalize the schools that actually need the most resources to address chronic absences. Flexible funding formulas based on need (e.g., using state-defined metrics, in the absence of federal ones, may open the door for more innovative methods of supporting young people (see box 2 for examples of states leading the way)).⁷

BOX 2

State Legislative Funding Initiatives That Increase School Funding Flexibility

- Maryland passed Bill 1030, the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, in 2019 to increase resources for schools serving high concentrations of students living in poverty. Such resources include before-and after-school and summer academic programs, health and social services for students, and increased support for English learners and special education students. Funding

prioritized a community school and an afterschool strategy along with strengthened CTE programming in high school. Programs include teacher salary grants, concentration of poverty grants, special education funding, teacher collaborative grants, mental health coordinator funding, and supplemental instruction grants.

- Massachusetts passed Bill 2412 in 2019, boosting investment in public schools by \$1.5 billion annually when fully phased in over the next seven years. These investments in school districts are meant to provide all students with high-quality education by revamping the formula the state uses to calculate educational costs. Costs related to health care and special education, as well as educating English language learners and students with low incomes, were updated to be more accurate.

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- **Create and provide guidance on student screenings and assessments.** School counselors should not have the burden of creating their own ways to assess students' needs. State departments of education can create these resources for their schools, making sure to explicitly ask about the adult roles that young people play in their households.

Here's how school districts can play important roles as well:

- **Set whole-child expectations for the superintendent.** Regardless of federal or state leadership on whole-child approaches and metrics, school districts can decide to hold their superintendents accountable. They hold decisionmaking power and carry the torch for empowering barrier breakers to create multiple pathways to graduate success.

Benefits for All

Creating a school climate of strong relationships and a sense of community benefits not only young people who may be taking on adult responsibilities at home, but also other students who may be struggling with physical or mental health challenges or disruptive life events, or who simply would be better served by additional supports or alternative education models (Restorative Practices Working Group 2014). With greater student engagement and a better understanding of the students served, schools may be able to adapt their programs in ways that boost achievement more broadly.

In addition, sharing responsibility for student support and creating a more inclusive and positive school culture can enhance the quality of the environment not only for students, but also for all school staff. These benefits may offset the costs of action.

Making School More Flexible

Armed with a better understanding of student needs, schools could be poised to support them more effectively. However, the default ways in which schools deliver education may make it difficult for students with adult responsibilities to succeed.

Education policies often do not allow traditional high schools much flexibility. Under the status quo, mainstream schools typically have the following:

- **Rigid school schedules.** Schools traditionally operate on a fixed schedule with the school day starting and ending at the same time for all students. Education policies also require a minimum number of days of attendance and require full-time loads for students.
- **Limited modalities.** Most school systems require on-site learning, which greatly limits a student's chances of success if they are not able to physically attend a class. This lack of flexibility ends up making it hard for students not to fall behind.
- **Time-sensitive graduation benchmarks.** The federal government uses a four-year graduation rate to measure school success. As a result, school systems feel pressured to push students to attend full time and meet all their requirements within those four years or alternatively transfer out of traditional schools so they do not bring down graduation numbers.

Students who have difficulty conforming to these rigidities may drop out or be directed to an alternative program—often only after failing their classes or dropping out.

Innovative Solutions

Despite the challenges, traditional schools can find innovative ways to offer flexible options earlier on to support young people and help them keep on track academically while they meet their other obligations.

- **Make full use of the school day, week, and calendar year.** Many young people with adult responsibilities may prefer in-person learning but cannot coordinate the hours, days, and so on with their work schedule or other demands on their time. It's also possible that these students cannot carry a full-time class load during the traditional school year but could handle it if they had the flexibility to spread their classes over the full calendar year, during summer and/or

other breaks. Schools can explore offering classes in the evenings, on weekends, or during the summer for students to get the credits they need (see example in box 3).

BOX 3

Giving Schools the Flexibility to Schedule Classes in Convenient Ways

In Texas, the Optional Flexible School Day Program allows districts to provide flexible hours and days of attendance for students who meet at least one requirement of Texas Education Code §29.0822(a). The program's goal is to improve graduation rates for students who are in danger of dropping out of school, have dropped out, or are behind in core subject courses. The policy can be used to provide extended day classes and evening and weekend classes, implement other variations of a flexible schedule, or offer credit-recovery sessions during the summer.

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- **Offer more flexible learning modalities.** A flexible learning model offers students the opportunity to learn the same course material in different ways. Although a teacher is available on-site, learning modalities can be customized individually with a combination of independent, online, and face-to-face support as needed. Schools might be able to do this in various ways (see box 4 for examples).
 - **Look for opportunities to recognize work students do and validate it with academic credit.** Some experts shared that their school districts give students academic credit for the hours they work; others suggested recognizing career-aligned CTE classes as meeting appropriate science or math requirements and helping students progress toward graduation more quickly.
 - **Explore providing a range of school models within school systems, including schools designed for working students.** Roadblocks with rigid school systems have encouraged some administrators to think outside of the box. Contract schools—which belong to their school districts but are managed by external organizations—or charter schools—which are independently operated-- can provide a vehicle for flexible school hours, locations for classroom instruction, work-based learning, credits for demonstrated competency, and connections to high-value postsecondary education and training.

BOX 4

Designing Flexible School Models

Schools across the country are finding different ways to help students earn the credits they need on their own schedules:

- At Greeley-Evans School District in Colorado, schedule modification is open to all students. Students are considered full time if they are enrolled in five classes, but they may take one or more classes using an independent study program that allows them to take work home or take online classes, come in to school as needed to check in and get support from teachers, and take tests to demonstrate mastery of the material.
- The School District of Philadelphia has academic programs for students leading to a high school diploma that range from fully online to blended learning (a mix of direct and online instruction) to full direct instruction. Their most flexible model is the district-run Educational Option Program and virtual school academies—all with no maximum enrollment. The Educational Options Program offers a mix of direct instruction and online courses and allows students of any age to earn credits toward their diploma during late afternoon hours. In the Philadelphia Virtual Academy, students do the majority of work online and can also work with school-based staff in person for tutoring or special academic services. These programs have ESL and special education services available as well.
- Maryland’s Children Guild conceived the TranZed Academy of Working Students (TAWS), a contact program with Montgomery County Public Schools. The program is built around jobs, so there are flexible school hours to accommodate work hours. For example, if a student works during the day, customized academic schedules such as online or night classes are offered. Tutoring and career or life coach supports that work with students in a holistic way are also offered. Year-round course availability also helps students stay on track to graduate. Currently, this model is only available to high school seniors. The TAWS model is also linked to a youth apprenticeship service for students looking to connect to higher-value employment and career opportunities (see next section on “Aligning Career and Technical Education (CTE) with Paid Work-Based Learning” for more details on these types of programs).

Policy Recommendations

The **federal** government can provide some framework for school flexibility by signaling the ways in which states and local school districts should think about the ultimate goal of graduation.

- **Ask states and local schools to report five- and six-year graduation rates as well.** Four-year graduation rates may be a good measure of performance for low-need students, but for ones with higher needs for flexibility, five- or even six-year graduation rates may be more helpful and less punitive for both schools and students. Ideally, reporting might eventually be stratified by student subgroups (Free and Reduced-price Meals (FARMS), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), etc.) and level of need as defined by the whole-child metrics suggested in

the last section on “Identifying and Supporting Young People at School.” This would allow states, districts, and schools to better understand the degree to which they are able to provide various supports to different types of students.

States have perhaps the most important role in supporting local innovation in terms of flexibility for working students and those with adult responsibilities.

- **Communicate existing policy flexibility to local school districts.** States can take the simple, low-cost step of clarifying and communicating current flexibilities in state policies related to school redesign and innovation, particularly any policies based on direct instruction and seat time. For example, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction issued a report on *Fostering Innovation in Wisconsin Schools: Beyond Credits and Seat Time and Toward Innovative Practices that Lead to College and Career Readiness*, which explains current seat-time requirements and describes 18 workable ways to provide flexibility to innovate (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2017).
- **Rethink funding formulas.** In some cases, schools are reluctant to offer different modalities because their funding depends on attendance and they have limited ways to track it for students who take online classes or correspondence courses. State policy can offer alternatives (see box 5).

BOX 5

Basing Funding on Credits Rather Than Hours of Attendance

In 2014, the Ohio Legislature passed a law to better align funding for high schools with its Credit Flex policy requiring districts to establish ways that students can earn credit for competency- and community-based learning.⁸ The law established that students grades 9–12 will be considered full-time students as long as they are enrolled in five units of instruction. Second, the new legislation affirmed that, “instead of [schools] being paid based on [each] student’s hours of attendance,” payment will be made based on the percentage of five approved credits [each] student takes.

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- **Consider switching from minimum days to minimum hours per academic year.** In general, the trend for school year length has been to increase the minimum number of days required per year. However, a policy to replace days-per-year requirements with hours-per-year requirements has emerged. Wisconsin was an early adopter of this policy, and currently 36

states measure the school year in hours per year either in addition to or in place of days per year. Using a minimum hour rather than day requirement can give states more flexibility for creative uses of time, such as a four-day school week.

- **Preapprove online college and other courses for high school credit.** Many local colleges offer online classes that could fulfill high school requirements. State departments of education should evaluate the quality of these classes and consider preapproving ones that meet high standards, negotiating low-cost or no-cost access for students and promoting their availability to local schools.
- **Expand age eligibility.** In many states, there is a cut-off age for enrollment in public middle and high school. Young people balancing school and work may need more time to finish. Just as we recommend tracking five- or six-year graduation rates for these young people, states should consider expanding age eligibility so that none are ejected from a public high school because they have aged out. Research supports the benefits of extending schooling on both ends of the K–12 spectrum—in the early years and through high school graduation (Diffey, Louisa, and Sarah Steffes 2017). Maryland and Texas expanded their compulsory attendance ages to 18 and 19, respectively. In addition, Vermont and Kansas have no upper age limit for free education.
- **Allow flexible funding for school districts to create, invest in, and scale schools with more flexible designs.** The movement to redesign schools is built on bottom-up, locally designed solutions rather than cookie-cutter models or rigid checklists of required reforms.⁹ State policymakers can support innovative approaches by providing flexible funding school districts can tap into to support innovation. This may include moving toward more *student-centered* and *competency-based education* (CBE) models, which may blend more flexible, student-paced curriculum delivery with work-based learning and/or a college and career focus.

Benefits for All

School flexibility not only helps students stay on track to graduate but may also relieve the pressure and anxiety of managing responsibilities outside of school. Ultimately, implementing flexibility with multiple paths to graduation may lead to better retention and completion overall. Students could customize education modalities and schedules to fulfill requirements and potentially even finish more quickly than they might under a more rigid regime. Mainstreaming flexibility can also destigmatize alternative models as they shift from being last-chance options to ones that can help meet all students where they are.

Aligning Career and Technical Education (CTE) with Paid Work-Based Learning

Through career and technical education (CTE), many high schools offer defined career pathways for young people that offer real opportunities to access high-value jobs right out of high school. However, young people with adult responsibilities—the students who could perhaps benefit most from these opportunities—often are unable to take advantage of them for a few important reasons:

- **Unpaid CTE.** Many schools offer various work opportunities including workplace simulations, internships, and job shadowing, but they are usually unpaid and unaccredited. Although these opportunities teach soft skills (teamwork, problem-solving, attendance, communication) and reinforce important technical skills that may position students for great job placements *after* graduation, many students with adult responsibilities cannot wait that long. They cannot afford to work for free with the limited hours they have available, and they do not have the luxury of engaging in educational activities that do not provide academic credits they need to graduate.
- **Rare registered apprenticeships, mostly reserved for adults.** Registered apprenticeships are widely recognized as the gold standard of quality work-based learning, and in many ways they would be ideal for young people who need to work while they learn. However, apprenticeships are relatively rare and often not available to minors. The average age of apprentices in the United States is around 30—a stark contrast to 17 or 18—the typical ages in some European countries (Whitehouse and Shafer 2017). In practice, youth opportunities in the United States are often designed as *pre*-apprenticeships, which provide needed skill development and pathways to apprenticeships but are usually *unpaid*.
- **Recruiting only the highest performing students for high-value placements.** Usually, employers handpick students for work-based learning opportunities. Businesses are understandably risk adverse and tend to favor the students who look best on paper, which may exclude students who have struggled with academics or attendance or those who do not have the connections and support systems that high-achieving students typically possess. Businesses often lack the capacity to implement strategies that both ensure quality hires and diversify their pipeline. Moreover, schools tend to defer to employer preferences and practices, wanting to ensure employer satisfaction with the placement. As a result, studies show significant racial

and ethnic inequities in work-based learning that may disproportionately affect young people who are taking on adult responsibilities.¹⁰

- **Limited school and employer capacity.** Schools often do not have the resources or capacity to effectively engage employers with their CTE programs. On the other hand, employers often do not understand work-based learning and CTE, may be intimidated by the processes of setting up these relationships and hiring minors, and do not understand how to design high-value work experiences for students.

Innovative Solutions

Schools and businesses alike are working in communities across the country to overcome these kinds of challenges. Experts in the field have highlighted efforts in various contexts that are making a difference:

- **Scale paid youth apprenticeships and other paid worked-based learning opportunities.** Registered youth apprenticeships combine classroom instruction with paid work experience, allowing young people with adult responsibilities to learn high-level, industry-recognized skills and credentials and connecting young people to career pathways where they earn money that makes a difference for their families. See an example of how states are scaling registered youth apprenticeships and other paid work-based learning opportunities in box 6.

BOX 6

Scaling Youth Apprenticeship and Other Work-Based Learning Opportunities

- Midlands Youth Apprenticeship Program in South Carolina is a partnership between Apprenticeship Carolina, Columbia Chamber of Commerce, Midlands Technical College (MTC), and participating Midlands school districts and employers. It is managed by MTC, an intermediary that provides youth apprentices with dual-enrollment college-level education and training, while employers provide the related on-the-job training and mentoring the students receive as they earn a paycheck for their hours worked. Participating employers advertise new opportunities through MTC, who promotes them through participating local area school districts. Students at these districts apply for the program with their high school's approval. Student applications that meet admissions requirements are then forwarded to the employers, who conduct their own selection and interview processes. Once students are selected by the employers, they are given job offers and begin their employment and classes. At the end of the program, successful apprentices graduate high school with two years of work experience, 24–30 hours of college credit, an industry-recognized certificate, and Department of Labor

credentials. As of August 26, 2019, South Carolina has 33,528 adult apprenticeships and 260 youth apprenticeships across the state, including 15 active youth apprentices under the Midlands Youth Apprenticeship Program.

- Indiana’s State Earn and Learn (SEAL) programs are structured yet flexible programs that pair paid work-based learning with education and training through partnerships with K–12 and postsecondary educational institutions and local employers. SEAL placements can last from weeks to years depending on employer, education, certification, or licensing requirements. The state conceptualized SEAL as a low-barrier alternative to registered apprenticeships for employers looking to partner with local schools. The program—along with the state’s full menu of work-based learning¹¹—also helps students comply with Indiana’s new Graduation Pathways¹² guidelines, which by 2023 will require all high school graduates to learn and demonstrate employability skills through project-, service-, or work-based learning.

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- **Employ committee models for placing students in high-value paid work-based learning.** One way for schools to both ensure the quality of their placements with employers and equity for young people is for school staff to broker these relationships through job-matching committees made up of teachers, counselors, and employers. See box 7 for an example of what one school district is doing.
 - **Prioritize developing relationships with employers.** Persuading employers to participate in work-based learning opportunities poses a challenge to enhancing CTE programs. Schools can increase their capacity to build relationships with both employers and students by designating and funding staff positions or by establishing partnerships with intermediaries.

BOX 7

Brokering Access to High-Value Work-Based Learning

At Greeley-Evans School District, teachers, counselors, and career pathways specialists collaborate in matching students with employers—taking into account various factors that make the student a good fit for the opportunity, including their need to work. Based on student responses to a skills survey, teachers, counselors, and career pathways specialists connect with Greeley’s business and community partnership administrator, who works with employers to specify their desired skill sets along with robust educational job descriptions. Then the students can apply to these jobs, and teachers will advocate for the placement of their students based on various factors. This team approach can help mitigate bias that may limit access to valuable opportunities or steer students of color and/or students with low incomes—who are disproportionately young people with adult responsibilities—to lower-

paying occupations or sectors. These committees are also in a position to help negotiate schedules with employers that work for young people and pinpoint the kinds of additional support they might need to be successful in work-based learning placements.

State and local chambers of commerce and business groups also have critical roles to play in these partnerships:

- **Coach employers on how to offer high-value work-based learning.** Many businesses—particularly smaller ones—do not know how to structure internships and other work-based learning opportunities to provide quality experiences that yield real value to their businesses. If they cannot see the value in the placement, they are also less likely to pay students for their work. Local chambers are well positioned to help their members understand how to structure these opportunities well and partner effectively with schools (see box 8 for examples).
- **Enlist human resources support for small businesses.** Many small- and medium-sized businesses do not have sophisticated human resources capabilities and balk at the potential risks of hiring minors. Local and state chambers of commerce could subsidize the services of a human resources attorney or staffing agency to answer questions and handle issues that arise (e.g., work permitting, worker’s compensation, liability insurance, etc.).
- **Build strong mentorship into work-based learning opportunities for young people.** Learning the ropes on the job can be a daunting task under the best circumstances, and young people with adult responsibilities often have complicated lives to manage on top of that. Some of the most successful youth apprenticeship models have employers designate staff who serve as mentors to apprentices, arranging a training plan, scheduling hours, coordinating with the school, providing direct training and feedback, and so on to make sure students can succeed on the job. These programs also tend to provide ongoing coaching and capacity building for the mentors themselves.¹³

BOX 8

Helping Employers Provide Higher-Quality Opportunities for Young People

The Wake Forest Chamber of Commerce received a grant from the US Chamber of Commerce to create a career readiness lab that teaches youth leadership development and soft skills and connects young people to internships. The chamber also provides businesses with human resources consulting to ease logistical burdens around hiring interns, as well as training and technical assistance on how to design

meaningful and high-value internships for young people. Schools and supervisors work with the chamber to develop work plans for students to ensure that interns have a fruitful experience. It can be challenging to persuade employers to participate in work-based learning programs, and Wake Forest is an example of a local chamber of commerce using their relationships with local businesses to connect students to internships.

Policy Recommendations

Federal and state policymakers can lead the way with the signals they send:

- **Establish benchmarks for work-based learning and particularly *paid* work-based learning.** The US Department of Education can establish benchmarks for work-based learning as a measure of college and career readiness to signal the importance of states creating or expanding these opportunities.
- **Expand funding for youth apprenticeship pilots and demonstrations** through the US Department of Labor **and field evaluations** of these as well as other state work-based learning programs.
- **Measure the financial impact that youth earnings from work-based learning make on family poverty and well-being**—not only program completion, job placement, and wages.

States can also take numerous steps to help build a supportive ecosystem for these practices:

- **Integrate work-based learning in graduation requirements**, as Indiana has done, to signal its importance to local schools and communities.
- **Pass legislation to remove barriers to youth apprenticeship (see box 9).**
- **Create, aid, and/or empower intermediaries to support apprenticeship, and make sure that any state initiatives around apprenticeship explicitly include young people.** Technical assistance, particularly in setting up youth apprenticeship programs, is critical to employers and can make the difference in building successful, long-standing relationships.
- **Provide tax credits to employers that engage in youth apprenticeships.** Employers may be more willing to participate in paid work-based learning programs if they are initially offered incentives like tax credits. Apprenticeship South Carolina allows employers to qualify for a \$1,000 tax credit for each apprentice in their program.¹⁴

BOX 9

Alabama Passes Landmark Legislation to Expand Apprenticeship

Alabama has legislation to support youth apprenticeships embedded in Act 2019-506. This legislation passed unanimously and does the following:

- removes all barriers to paid apprenticeship for secondary students (ages 16 and 17);
- names the community college system as “Intermediary” so secondary and adult education recruitment can take place (as well as articulation);
- offers a tax credit to all companies onboarding an apprenticed student; and
- offers an additional tax credit if the apprenticed student is age 16 or 17.

The state is beginning to implement the programs as early as spring 2020, with the idea of expanding as many programs as possible in fall 2020.

Benefits for All

Aligning CTE with paid work gets young people with adult responsibilities on career pathway and in school while balancing work—motivating students to stay in school and complete their programs. Paid work programs are also important because they enhance work readiness as well as necessary skills and competencies for all students; these programs also have the potential to strengthen buy-in and commitment from employers. Employers who pay their student employees are more invested in students’ success.

Facilitating Access to Other Work Opportunities

Not all employment opportunities have to be associated with highly structured CTE, work-based learning, or apprenticeship programs. For young people with adult economic responsibilities, dependable jobs can make a big difference in their lives, as long as they can balance the schedule and responsibilities with home life and school. However, getting and holding a job is not always easy.

- **Difficulties with job search.** Students often have a difficult time looking for jobs while they are in school. They may not be aware of the jobs available to them, and most schools do not have the resources or expertise to assist students with their job search.
- **Limited job search assistance for teens.** A plethora of youth development programs are in communities across the country, but many targeted to high school students focus heavily on job readiness and training rather than job search assistance, placement, and retention support. Other programs—many of which have impactful results—focus specifically on “opportunity youth” who have already dropped out of school and do not intervene early enough. Moreover, youth development tends to be underfunded, and organizations do not have the capacity to serve all the young people who might need assistance.
- **Limited capacity, low quality, and below-market wages in summer youth employment programs (SYEP).** Evidence is growing that summer youth employment programs can be impactful in many ways, but they are typically only available to a small number of young people in the summer months.¹⁵ Further, the quality of summer jobs can vary by city and employer. Securing a summer job does not necessarily guarantee a fruitful opportunity. Students who take these jobs sometimes earn even less than the minimum wage because of limited local budgets for subsidized wages and assumptions that young people are only earning “pocket change” rather than helping to meet real needs for themselves and their families.¹⁶
- **Policies meant to protect children may make it more difficult for them to be hired.** Some occupations that might provide good wages and opportunities for young people (e.g., industries as diverse as manufacturing and construction) are essentially closed to them because of child labor restrictions. Smaller employers also may be unsure of how to handle different restrictions on the hours and days that they can have minors working.

- **Transportation difficulties.** Teens with adult responsibilities need reliable transportation to go to and from work and school, run errands, and help take care of siblings. Yet young people are the least likely to have access to a car at their discretion. Existing transit pass programs—where they do exist for students—tend to limit availability to the school year and particular hours of the day.
-

Policy Solutions

The federal government can better support youth employment through direct funding as well as encourage and allow states to use existing funding—like that through WIOA—to help connect young people to jobs.

States can open up more employment opportunities for young people by taking numerous steps:

- **Pass legislation that can connect employers directly to students.** Colleges, universities, and the military already have access to student information for recruitment purposes with parental approval, but employers do not. States have the power to facilitate this kind of data sharing, which would help employers reach out directly to young people about employment opportunities without overburdening school staff (see box 10).
- **Facilitate waivers of occupational restrictions where appropriate.** State departments of labor could reexamine their industries and assess which ones might offer high-value, in-demand jobs that are restricted for minors but could be suitable if given sufficient oversight; states could strategically grant waivers for particular industries, occupations, or even employers. States could also encourage closer partnership between these industries, CTE, and youth apprenticeship to ensure quality and safety, as well as allow young people and their parents to opt out of occupational restrictions.
- **Streamline work-permitting processes.** Short of implementing strategic waivers or eliminating occupational restrictions for minors—which would likely require state legislative action—state departments of labor can work with school systems to streamline the work-permitting process. For example, school enrollment information could automatically populate and generate work permit forms for students rather than only when there is a specific job available or job offer in hand.

Local governments and school districts can also make a difference in facilitating access to employment opportunities for young people in their communities:

- **Partner with business and industry to offer summer youth employment programs year-round.** Some cities, in partnership with private-sector partners, have found ways to expand their youth employment programs to serve young people year-round and connect to them to steadier employment opportunities. Rather than having rigorous application processes or open lotteries, cities should consider prioritizing placements for the young people for whom the placements would make the greatest difference. In theory, cities could coordinate with schools doing effective screening (see section on “Identifying and Supporting Young People at School”), or cities could borrow screening protocols.
- **Make transportation for young people free: period.** Sacramento, California; Tempe, Arizona; Seattle, Washington; and Greeley, Colorado, offer free transit passes for young people in grades K–12. Free year-round transportation would allow students to get to work and school and fulfill family obligations more easily. Local chambers of commerce and other business groups can also be part of the solution by providing transportation to and from job sites.
- **Recruit and hire students directly.** School districts and governments are huge employers that generally offer decent wages and benefits and always need to recruit and develop new talent. Young people could be good candidates for entry-level positions, particularly those identified by caring adults at their schools. The Philadelphia school district and the Greeley-Evans School District in Colorado offer high school students training to work in the district itself.

BOX 10

Facilitating Direct Connections between Students and High-Quality Jobs and Career Pathways

The Career Preparation Expansion Act (Maryland HB 1216/SB 978) allows students and parents to release students’ Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery scores and contact information to registered apprenticeship programs, youth apprenticeship programs, and other employers that register with the state department of labor or local workforce development boards. This is roughly equivalent to what we already do to release of student information for the purposes of military or college recruitment.

Benefits for All

Youth employment has steadily declined over the past few decades; simultaneously, young people need work experience more than ever to compete in the marketplace. Putting the systems in place to facilitate better access to employment for young people with adult responsibilities would have the added effect of better preparing whole generations to succeed in the economy and could reduce the substantial racial and ethnic inequalities in early access to employment.

Looking Forward

Stakeholders may be skeptical of some suggestions in this toolkit for many legitimate reasons—in whole or in part. Notably, skeptics will say that schools are already overburdened; it is difficult and expensive to make systems changes; and focusing on the young people at the heart of these recommendations means trading off some resources for their peers. All of these reasons are, in some sense, undoubtedly true.

But we must remember that implementing these strategies promises to have a “curb-cut” effect that may benefit all our young people. The systems changes we know could make a difference for teens with adult responsibilities align incredibly well with the ones needed to move our education and employment systems forward into the new decade. These strategies can help close equity and inclusion gaps in achievement, graduation, and career opportunities; and they help our young people build the skills and competencies they need to contribute to their local economies and keep us globally competitive.

The task of systems change can feel overwhelming. Many strategies in this toolkit align with much larger movements toward competency or proficiency-based education, student-centered education, and numerous other comprehensive approaches seeking to both impart knowledge and value students in new ways.

Nevertheless, no one expects states, districts, schools, employers, and communities to completely transform the way they do things all at once. They can start small, experiment with different strategies, and figure out what works best for them. There is so much room to make things better for all our children. We cannot be afraid to try.

Appendix. Expert Partners

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Burck Smith, CEO, StraighterLine

Notes

- ¹ See Disability Science Review, “The Curb Cut Effect: How Making Public Spaces Accessible to People With Disabilities Helps Everyone.” Medium, Dec 11, 2016, <https://medium.com/@mosaicofminds/the-curb-cut-effect-how-making-public-spaces-accessible-to-people-with-disabilities-helps-everyone-d69f24c58785>.
- ² See for more detail on student needs assessment resources here: April J. Megginson and R. Paul Maddox II, “Upgrading Your Needs Assessment,” ASCA (American School Counselor Association), October, 2018, <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/newsletters/october-2018/upgrading-your-needs-assessment>.
- ³ See more information on Community Schools here: “What Is a Community School?” Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership, accessed January 31, 2020, http://www.communityschools.org/aboutschools/what_is_a_community_school.aspx. Organizations like Counseling in Schools, which have much more narrow goals, also have useful resources: “About,” Counseling in Schools, accessed January 31, 2020, <https://www.counselinginschools.org/about/>.
- ⁴ To learn more about whole-child approaches, see The Whole Child, accessed January 31, 2020, <http://www.wholechildeducation.org/>.
- ⁵ Various whole-child metrics exist in many different domains. For a downloadable document outlining all of them, see “Whole Child Tenets,” The Whole Child, 2013, <http://www.wholechildeducation.org/assets/content/mx-resources/wholechildindicators-all.pdf>.
- ⁶ See existing federal guidance on reporting here: US Department of Education (2017).
- ⁷ For more on how states fund local districts and schools, see Chingos and Blagg (2014).
- ⁸ “FAQs: Required Days to Required Hours,” Ohio Department of Education, updated July 9, 2019, <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Finance-and-Funding/Finance-Related-Data/Guidance-on-Schedule-Change-from-Days-to-Hours/FAQs-Required-Days-to-Required-Hours#FAQ2038>.
- ⁹ Craig Jerald, Neil Campbell, and Erin Roth, “High Schools of the Future: How States Can Accelerate High School Redesign,” Center for American Progress, December 4, 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2017/12/04/443615/high-schools-future-states-can-accelerate-high-school-redesign/>.
- ¹⁰ Angela Hanks, Annie McGrew, and Daniella Zessoules, “The Apprenticeship Wage and Participation Gap,” Center for American Progress, July 11, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2018/07/11/453321/apprenticeship-wage-participation-gap/>.
- ¹¹ For a description of each of the work-based learning programs in the state of Indiana, see “The Office of Work-Based Learning and Apprenticeship,” Indiana Office of Work-Based Learning and Apprenticeship, accessed January 31, 2020, <https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/graduation-pathways/wbl-onepager.pdf>.
- ¹² For more on Indiana’s Graduation Pathways, see “Graduation Pathways Panel,” Indiana State Board of Education, finalized November 7, 2017, <https://www.in.gov/sboe/files/Grad%20Pathways%20-%20Draft%20Pathway%20Recommendations%20-%20final.pdf>.
- ¹³ For more detail on the State of Wisconsin’s Youth Apprenticeship Mentoring model, see https://media.wisconsin.gov/det/ext/ya/mod03_mentoring/index.html
- ¹⁴ See “Apprenticing America: The Effects of Tax Credits for Registered Apprenticeship Programs,” Georgetown University, April 19, 2019, <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/1055057>

- ¹⁵ Studies have documented substantial reductions in delinquency as a result of SYEPs. See a summary of the evidence here: Alicia Sasser Modestino, “Do Summer Youth Employment Programs Work?” *Econofact*, June 28, 2019, <https://econofact.org/do-summer-youth-employment-programs-work>. Some of these gains may be because of wages that offset the material hardship motivating some young people with adult responsibilities to find ways to earn money by any means necessary.
- ¹⁶ See profile of the issue with summary employment wages in one community here: Eva Herscowitz, “Some Evanston Teenagers Say Mayor’s Summer Youth Employment Program Wages Not Enough,” *The Daily Northwestern*, October 22, 2019, <https://dailynorthwestern.com/2019/10/22/city/some-evanston-teenagers-say-mayors-summer-youth-employment-program-wages-not-enough/>.

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