

**KEYS TO SCALE: HOW TO GROW THE  
IMPACT OF EDUCATION-TO-CAREER  
PATHWAY INTERMEDIARIES**



August 2024

# From islands of excellence to a nation of opportunity

In communities across the country, youth are being given a more expansive set of pathways to economic opportunity and mobility.

**Through the leadership of regional education-to-career intermediary organizations, K-12, higher education, youth serving organizations, and employers have joined forces to design career-connected learning opportunities that equitably accelerate students' path to a credential with value in the workplace.**

Students and their families are yearning for these opportunities. Nearly 90% want diverse pathways toward careers, and many see career-connected learning opportunities starting in high school as a way to enable that. They understand that the current approach to education fundamentally needs to shift to meet the evolving economy.

**Student success does not end at the high school graduation stage; rather, a postsecondary credential—especially one aligned with the labor market—is a ticket to economic mobility.**

To equitably drive individual and community economic mobility, the country needs to unlock career pathways that lead to labor market-aligned credentials at scale. Leading communities that have equitably-scaled, high-quality pathways all have a common driving force: an organization that can bring together cross-sector actors around a common vision. These **“education-to-career pathway intermediaries”** and the functions they provide for their respective communities are key enablers for pathways scale.



Unfortunately, there are currently barriers that limit their capacity and ability to support dramatically more students. As the following pages demonstrate, while the context of the work may differ across communities, there is a growing body of evidence about the highest leverage actions that intermediaries can take to improve impact and scale. **With further infrastructure, investment, and support, the country can move from islands of excellence to a nation of opportunity.**

# Toward a deeper understanding of education-to-career pathway intermediary impact and opportunity

There have been numerous reports describing organizations that stand at the intersection of education, workforce, and community, working to bring together collective efforts to address problems and grow opportunities for youth. Research has found that there are over 200 such organizations, collectively referred to as “intermediaries.” A subset of those organizations are specifically focused on how to grow the number of pathways that begin in high school, lead to a labor-market aligned postsecondary credential, and set students up for workforce success. These “education-to-career pathway intermediaries” have grown in number and scale in the last five years. Their efforts are beginning to have considerable impact in communities across the country, and yet, very little has been done to understand and document why certain organizations are successful and what may be limiting their further success in supporting equitable student outcomes.

To do that, Education Strategy Group undertook a 12-month process to (1) synthesize its expertise from partnering with more than 50 organizations across the country to strengthen intermediary functions; (2) review and summarize previous research on intermediary functions and their contributions to learner outcomes; (3) examine the functions, financials, and impact for intermediary organizations across the country; (4) learn from intermediary leaders about the highest impact functions and most significant barriers to scaling impact; and, (5) engage a group of national, state, and local intermediary leaders to co-design recommendations for growing the capacity of individual organizations and field. The following report details our findings.

Education Strategy Group (ESG) has been at the center of the movement to scale high-quality pathways for students, working alongside numerous education-to-career pathway intermediaries to ensure equitable access and success. In developing this report, ESG set out to answer three main questions:

- 1 Why are education-to-career pathway intermediaries critical for increasing equitable pathway access and success?**
- 2 What are the highest impact functions of education-to-career pathway intermediaries in driving pathway access and success?**
- 3 What is needed to help education-to-career pathway intermediaries individually, and the field broadly, to further scale pathway access and success?**

# Why are education-to-career pathway intermediaries critical for increasing equitable pathway access and success?

They serve a dual role of filling current system shortcomings and generating momentum to create a more thriving system to support youth.

## ADDRESS CURRENT GAPS

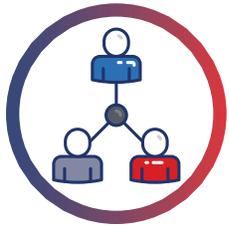
- Convene to bring coherence across fragmented K-12, higher education, and workforce systems
- Set a high bar for quality of career pathways
- Keep equity at the forefront of all conversations
- Provide employers and sector leaders with a single point of contact
- Adapt capacity to meet real-time needs of the local context, and help build the capacity of others towards realizing a cohesive system

## ESTABLISH A BETTER FUTURE

- Set a vision for an education and training system that leads more students of color and those from low-income backgrounds to economic mobility
- Sustain momentum as “durable partners” across periods of transition
- Shift narratives about the value of pathways
- Change enabling policy and funding conditions aligned to a new vision for facilitating student success
- Over time, work to embed core intermediary functions into the fabric of the education and training system

# What are the highest impact functions of education-to-career pathway intermediaries in driving pathway access and success?

Education-to-career pathway intermediary functions serve as the linchpin for equitably scaling pathways:



## CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

Intermediaries bring together diverse parties around a common vision for high-quality pathways for all youth, and hold partners accountable for delivering on that vision. They formalize partnerships, establish goals, distribute resources, and ensure continued momentum across political and staff transitions.



## PATHWAYS DESIGN AND SUPPORT

Intermediaries support the development, delivery, and refinement of pathway programming by sector partners that is recognized by the state or region, focusing on quality and equitable access and success. They elevate community voices in system design, identify barriers to equitable implementation, and drive toward innovative solutions or system design changes.



## EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Intermediaries coordinate with employers to align educational programming to meet their needs and create opportunities for youth to engage in the world of work alongside their schooling. They secure partnerships, manage work-based learning opportunities, and train employers on how to best engage youth in their work.



## DATA COLLECTION AND USE

Intermediaries act as capacity builders within communities, collecting and reporting on outcomes, facilitating data analysis for informed decision-making, cultivating student and family voices, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

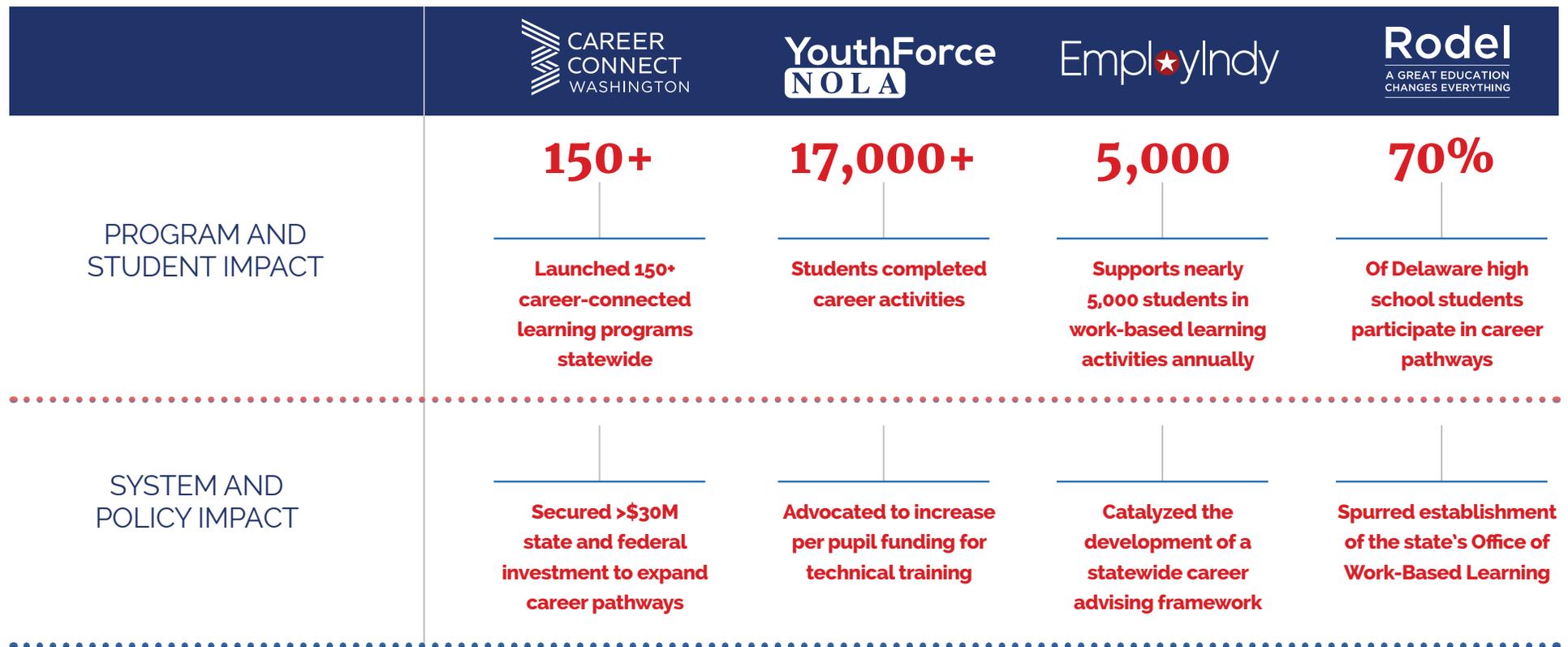


## POLICY AND FUNDING ADVOCACY

Intermediaries address system shortcomings and advocate for systems changes that grow pathway opportunities, align with community needs, and deliver equitable outcomes. They document and share proof points and articulate a non-partisan rationale for change.

# What is needed to help education-to-career pathway intermediaries individually, and the field broadly, scale pathway access and success?

The most successful intermediaries are having impact both programmatically and in influencing system change. Their programmatic work helps accelerate systems change by: demonstrating what is possible within a functioning, equity-focused system; creating proof points for replication; building capacity within organizations across sectors, contributing to their ability to develop future pathways programs; catalyzing public and private investment; and institutionalizing new programs and practices. Examples of impact include:



# Increased investment and greater field infrastructure can dramatically scale opportunities for youth

Growing the scale and impact of education-to-career pathways intermediaries will require greater philanthropic investment in the short-term and public sector and private investment in the long-term.



# Education-to-career pathway intermediaries unlock pathway scale

There is great work underway across the country led by education-to-career pathway intermediaries to expand the equitable success of youth in those pathways. Unfortunately, scale is not attainable through one-off efforts.



The road toward scale will require greater public and private investment to support the critical functions of education-to-career pathway intermediaries and an infrastructure that can catalyze cross-organizational learning to strengthen the field. This can lead to:

- 1 Greater alignment across K-12 and higher education;**
- 2 Deeper engagement and buy-in from industry; and**
- 3 Improved long-term student outcomes.**

Now is the time to maximize the critical functions of education-to-career pathway intermediaries to scale high-quality pathways aligned with labor market demand, ensure that students have equitable access to success in those pathways, and ultimately deliver on the vision of an education and training system that truly provides economic prosperity for all.

# What are education-to-career pathway intermediaries?



# A high-quality career pathway will lead learners to credentials, family sustaining careers, and ultimately economic mobility, through:

- A rigorous sequence of courses that prepares students for success in multiple paths that lead to economic success;
- Connected opportunities to earn credentials and early postsecondary credit, experience work alongside school, and develop their networks and social capital; and
- Advising to help students discover interests, map and plan their path from education to career, and ensure they're receiving the appropriate support for where they want to go.



**EDUCATION-TO-CAREER PATHWAY INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATIONS** work to catalyze a career pathways ecosystem—or network of actors supporting youth success. They wake up every day thinking about alignment of systems and set a table for learners; K-12, higher education, and workforce representatives; youth-serving community organizations; and employers and sector partners to interact with the goals of ensuring that career pathways are broadly and equitably implemented.

# Catalytic events have often led to the creation of education-to-career pathway intermediaries

Communities typically have a catalytic event that brings a focus on the system design shortcomings. This creates a demand for capacity to support next steps that intermediaries are well positioned to fill.

## Common Catalytic Events

**Economic or Social Upheavals:** Recessions, relocation/downsizing of major companies, awakening to issues of racial or economic injustice have catalyzed organizations to focus or re-focus on career pathways and economic mobility.

**Visionary Leadership:** Policymaker (Governor or Mayor Task Force), employer, or funder called for or set a vision that brought key partners to the table, catalyzed resources, or established a "call to action" for connecting traditionally siloed systems.

**Legislative or Regulatory Changes:** Changes to state or regional policy that require coordination of cross-sector partners (i.e. attainment goals, new public investments, funding formula changes).

**Data-Driven Analysis:** Data-driven reports that uncover gaps within the talent pipeline.

**Resource or Program Analysis:** An examination of the multitude of service providers, including strengths and gaps, that leads to inquiry of why, despite this abundance, results remain unsatisfactory.

## Leading to the creation of



Typically aligned around education, credential attainment, or employment goals.

# Explore example origin and evolution stories of leading education-to-career pathway intermediaries



Career Connect Washington is a statewide coordinating entity that works through regional intermediaries to expand career-connected learning in Washington state.

READ MORE  
CLICK HERE



YouthForce NOLA is a regional intermediary working with numerous local education agencies, higher education institutions, and employers in the New Orleans region.

READ MORE  
CLICK HERE



Say Yes Buffalo is a collective impact partnership focused on access to good jobs in the Buffalo region.

READ MORE  
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EmployIndy is an intermediary led by a federally regulated workforce development board serving the Greater Marion County region.

READ MORE  
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CityWorks DC works to reform education and employment systems in Washington, DC.

READ MORE  
CLICK HERE

For more examples of education-to-pathway intermediary organizations, see reports by [Education First](#), [Equal Measure](#), [JFE](#), and [Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship](#).

**Building a pathways ecosystem is critical to student success.**

“I felt more prepared for college and my career path because these exposure opportunities [within education-to-career pathway programming] sharpened my motivation, determination, and confidence to realize my passion, while giving me the sense of what it would take for me to reach my ultimate career goal.”

High School Student,  
New York City

# What are the core functions of education-to-career pathway intermediaries?



# The education and talent systems remain largely disconnected

Equitable student success is only a vision, not a reality at scale. For far too many youth—especially students of color and those from low-income backgrounds—the path from education to employment remains rocky. Education-to-career pathway intermediaries have taken a greater role in filling the shortcomings of our current education and talent systems.

## SYSTEM DESIGN SHORTCOMINGS

K-12, higher education, and workforce systems are fragmented, with limited shared accountability, resulting in a lack of coordination, alignment, and coherence, ultimately resulting in a structure that does not comprehensively meet the needs of students or employers.



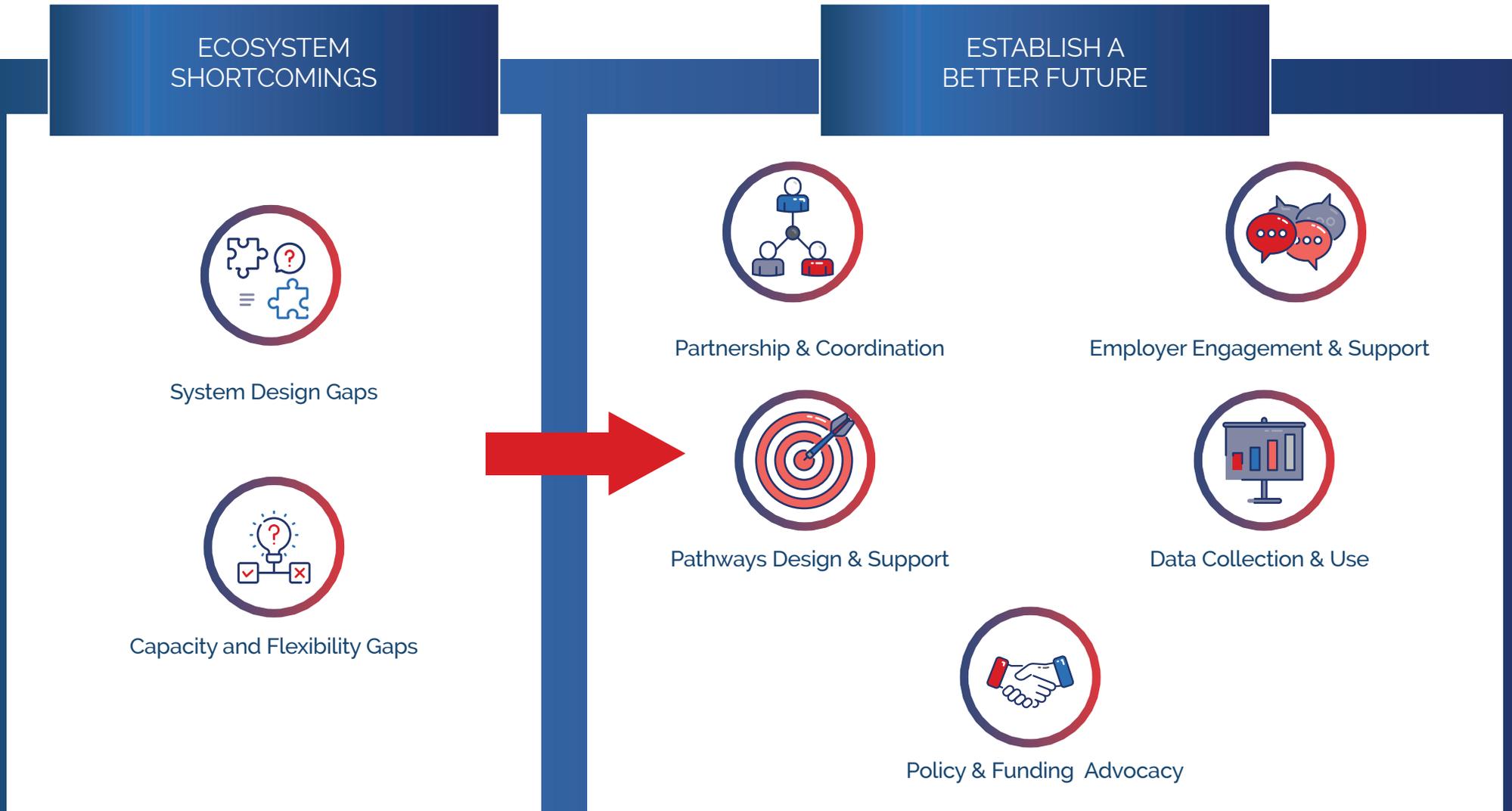
## CAPACITY AND FLEXIBILITY SHORTCOMINGS

Systems change can be difficult to drive from inside the system. There may be limited knowledge or awareness for how to design and scale pathways, and capacity to develop and sustain education-to-career pathways is thin.



# Intermediaries solve for pathways ecosystem shortcomings

The shortfalls of the ecosystem have created a demand for those outside of the public system to fulfill these functions.



# Intermediary organizations play a key role in convening partners to establish a common vision

Intermediary organizations bring together K-12, higher education, workforce, and youth serving partners to establish a common vision and drive toward implementation of that vision.

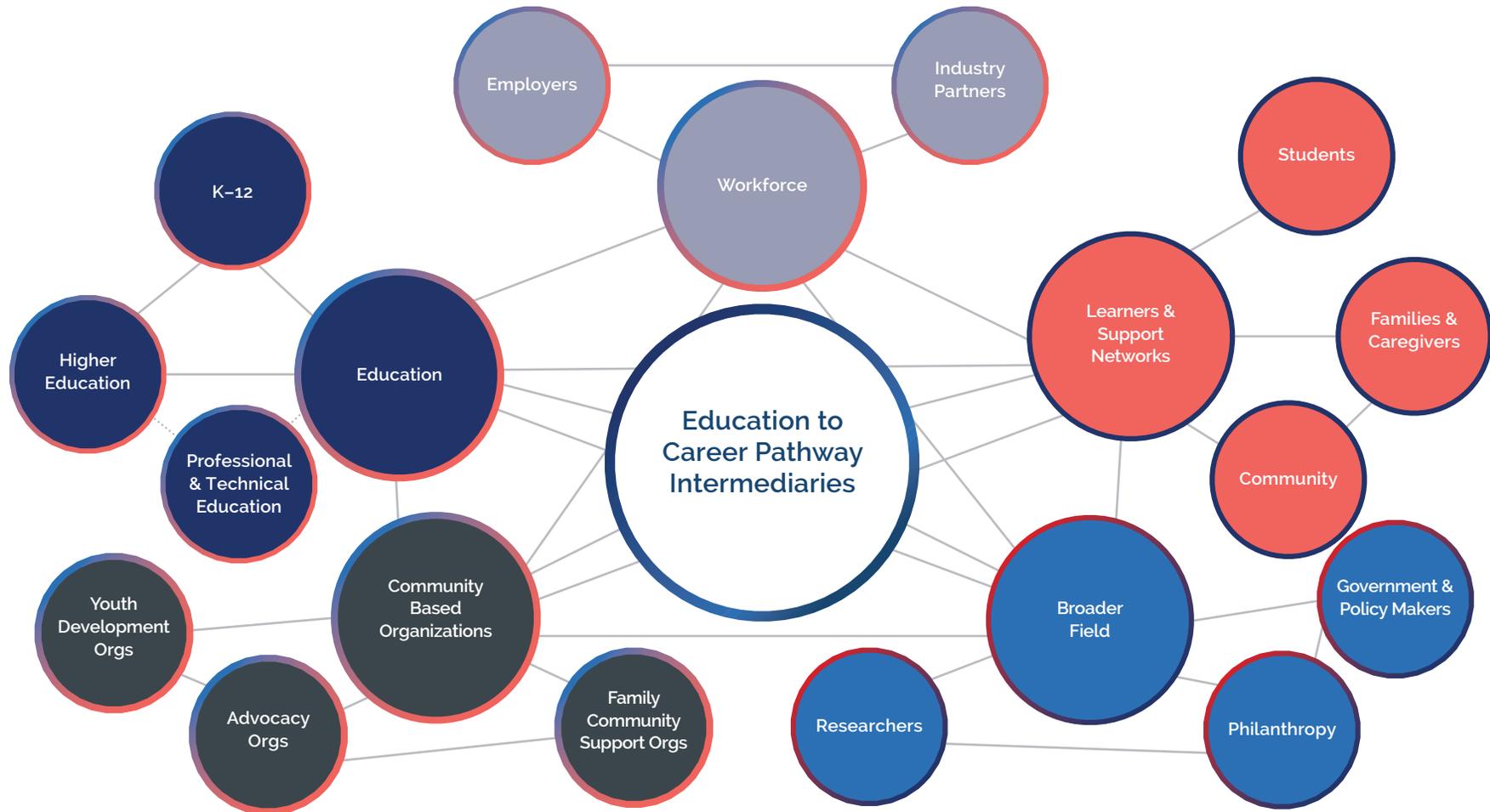
- **Despite differences in organizational structure, all play a critical role in convening cross-sector partners to drive toward a shared vision.** They build relationships and formalize partnerships that are traditionally siloed and do not convene on their own.
- **Through this work, they take a leading role in establishing a common community vision and aligned goals. This work often drives toward both systemic and programmatic changes** that increase educational attainment and aligned work-based learning opportunities, and ultimately support preparation and placement in jobs that are high-wage and high-demand.



**“Say Yes Buffalo has been one of the key local leaders in the creation, implementation, and long-term sustainability of a robust career pathways ecosystem in Buffalo. Because SYB is really focused on systems change, it can connect various constituents and organizations in ways that most of us cannot do individually. SYB has been critical in giving students real pathways to a college credential or degree.”**

College Leader, Buffalo

# Education-to-career pathway intermediaries serve as “durable partners” to create and strengthen a web of critical connections



- Designing equitable pathways, aligned with labor market demand, requires intermediaries to have strong partnerships with K-12 schools, postsecondary institutions, employers, community-based organizations, and learners.
- Over 90% of intermediary organizations surveyed report that partner formalization and “cross-organizational collaboration” are top contributions of their work.

# Intermediaries design, support, and deliver programs that create proof points and drive toward their community vision

Education-to-career pathway intermediary organizations provide capacity to support the development, delivery, and refinement of career pathways programming.

- **Intermediaries coordinate with employers to align educational programming** to meet their needs and create opportunities for youth to engage in the world of work alongside their schooling. They secure partnerships, manage work-based learning opportunities, and train employers on how to best engage youth in their work.
- **Intermediaries identify and support implementation gaps.** The structure of intermediaries allow them to be agile in addressing the dynamic and changing nature of needs within the ecosystem, including change in roles and occupations within industry. This allows them to enhance community capacity for implementation, identify and fill gaps as needed, and create opportunities for codification and replication at regional or state levels.
- **Intermediaries use their knowledge of the content and the ecosystem to propose innovative ideas that will help realize the community goals.** This might include the creation of a pilot that can serve as a proof point for a new idea or the delivery of youth programming (i.e. internships, advising supports) that help meet the goals of the community.

**“YouthForce NOLA’s focus on providing young people meaningful work experience while in K-12 and shortly after is huge and has created a shared vision in the community and among employers about the importance of this experience to train and retain young people in our community.”**

City Leader, New Orleans

# Intermediaries work to reshape the conditions for scaling education-to-career pathways

The success and impact of intermediaries depends in part on the strength of the enabling conditions within a community, and many organizations focus their work on improving those conditions.

- **Positioned outside the public system, intermediaries are uniquely able to advocate for necessary policy and funding changes, ensuring scalability and sustainability of pathways.** They leverage their role as “durable partners,” equipped with historical knowledge, to maintain progress through political and staff transitions.
- **Intermediaries champion non-partisan change** by using data and amplifying community voices to assess gaps, share proof points, and articulate a rationale for change. They build coalitions to align around a common policy agenda that grows pathway opportunities, aligns with community needs, and delivers equitable outcomes.



“[Education to] Career pathways allow students to explore different possibilities for their future careers that they may not get the chance to with the standard academic curriculum. We don’t know what we don’t know, meaning students can’t possibly prepare for the new up-and-coming, in-demand careers if they aren’t aware that they even exist.”

High School Senior,  
Ohio

# What impact have education-to-career pathway intermediaries had to date?



# Measuring the impact of intermediaries varies based on the structure and approach of the intermediary organizations

The lack of shared metrics is holding back the education-to-career pathway intermediary field.

- **The most successful intermediaries are having impact both programmatically and in influencing system change.** These organizations have often committed resources and capacity for data collection and reporting, recognizing the importance of continuous improvement and telling their story of impact.
- **Across the field, organizations report their impact on many different dimensions,** making it difficult to compare impact or identify opportunities for improvement.
- The following pages demonstrate examples of how three leading education-to-career pathway intermediary organizations are shaping important conversations in their communities and having major ripple effects programmatically and system wide.

The following are the most often reported types of impact, but only few organizations consistently report on all of them:

#### **Student Education and Employment Outcomes:**

Reporting the number of students served, program completions, credentials earned, and employment outcomes in pathways programs.

#### **Resource and Funding Allocation Changes:**

Aligning local, state, and federal resources and attracting new investments into the community.

#### **Vision and Articulation of Responsibilities:**

Demonstrating engagement and collective understanding of shared vision, goals, or strategy.

**Public Policy Change:** Driving policy and legislative changes that codify potential solutions to gaps in the system.

Since its inception, Career Connect Washington has impacted the state's pathways ecosystem in the following ways:

## Program and Student Outcomes

150+

**new programs**, over 30 of which are registered apprenticeships

115

**Career Launch programs created**  
(July 2019-June 2022)

78

**program builders awarded grants** to expand or develop 111 career-connected learning programs across the continuum

150+

**businesses employing students** in endorsed Career Launch programs



Created through legislation, CCW is a statewide intermediary that works to build and coordinate with a network of regional intermediaries. It also partners with other organizations to advocate for policy change and channels resources to communities.

## System and Policy Changes

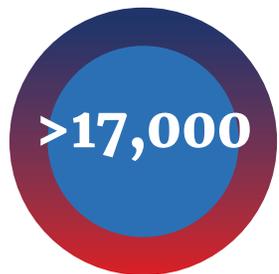
- In 2020, the legislature **increased CCW's budget** to meet demand among additional high schools, colleges, intermediaries, and employers.
- In 2022, CCW received an outpouring of **support for the \$23.5 million CCW Good Jobs Challenge grant** led by the Washington Student Achievement Council and the \$5.6 million CCW Apprenticeship Building America grant led by the Employment Security Department.
- Data infrastructure created to track student outcomes in programs to assess progress toward more equitable student outcomes in Washington State.

**“I think the ultimate vision of this thing has always been the system. All the various important parts of the system and the process are going to embed their role in this work. They’re going to start funding it and doing it and leading it and owning it...”**

Angie Mason-Smith,  
Washington STEM

Since its inception, YouthForce NOLA has impacted the city's pathways ecosystem in the following ways:

## Program and Student Outcomes



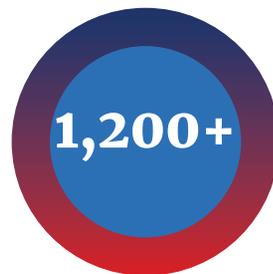
students have participated in career education programs



educators have been directly trained to incorporate soft skills in their classrooms; New Orleans' educators have directly impacted 3,340 students through the Soft Skills Teacher Fellowship



industry credentials earned across all high school graduates



students have completed paid YouthForce NOLA Internships



Developed as a city-wide investment to combat employment challenges and partner with schools, the organization leads a coordinated network of education, business, and community partners to offer internship, career exploration, and skill development experiences. They also advocate for policy change at the state level and serve as the local Perkins funding administrator.

## Systemic and Policy Changes

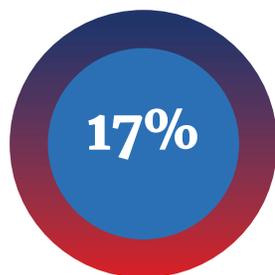
- **228 partners aligned and collaborating around a shared vision**
- **Partner grants provided** toward shared vision and student impact
- **Raised funding to support shared vision** across federal, philanthropic, and city resources, with \$7.5M raised in 2021–22
- **Policy changes to support shared vision:**
  - 2022 legislation enables the Louisiana Workforce Commission to **study aggregate workforce outcomes of education programs** — allowing to assess effectiveness of programs, monitor progress toward goals, and differentiate programming for students
  - 2022 **legislation** increased public per pupil funding for technical training
  - **Work-based learning transportation plan:** Played a key role, in collaboration with Ride New Orleans and the Regional Planning Commission, to ensure that youth needs, interests, and voices were included in New Links, the region’s redesigned public transit network.

**“Years ago it used to be [that] we had to do a lot of convincing of people that this work was necessary and relevant and needed. We don’t have to do that anymore. So that’s a barrier that’s been removed. What YouthForce NOLA has done is really shifted the narrative around the value in this work, the need for employers not only to engage in the work, but the benefit to employers of having engaged in the work.”**

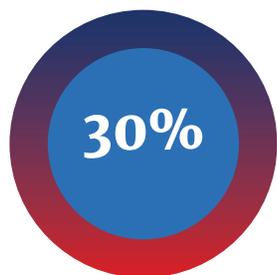
Larry Washington, President,  
Junior Achievement of  
Greater New Orleans

Since the launch of Say Yes Buffalo, the city has seen the following:

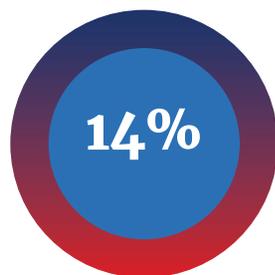
## Student Outcomes



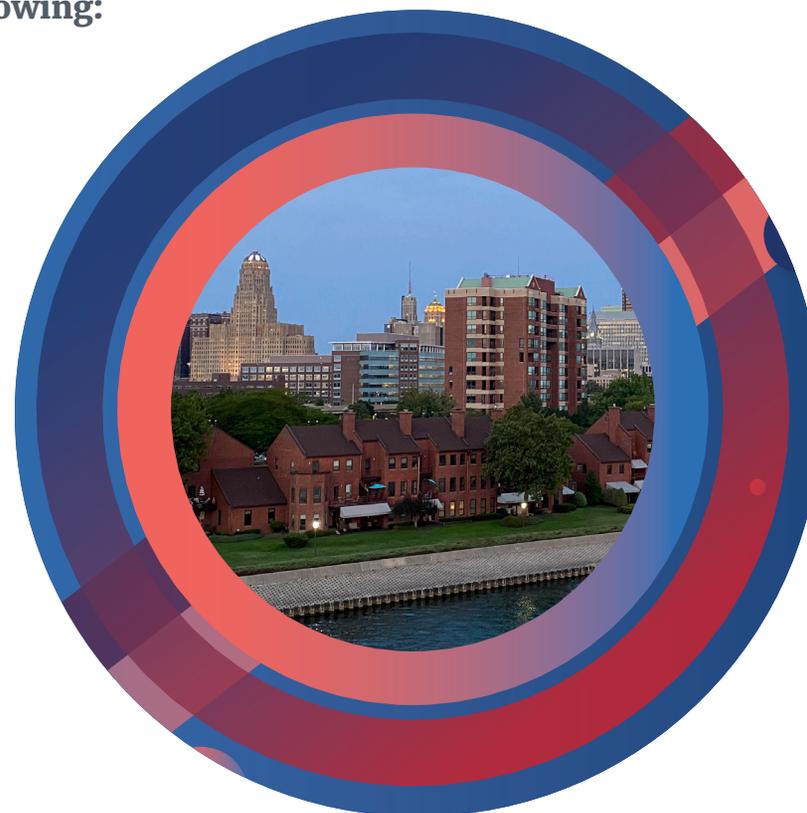
**increase in  
postsecondary entrance**



**increase in high school  
graduation rates**



**increase in  
postsecondary completion**



Established as a national Say Yes to Education city, Say Yes Buffalo transitioned to a local governing board in 2020. They are responsible for setting the vision for actors across the Buffalo region, transitioning from an initial focus on postsecondary access and attainment to youth finding living wage jobs in the region. The organization also supports state-level policy advocacy.

## System and Policy Changes

- Has regularly **convened an operating committee representing key local stakeholders**, since 2011
- Supported the **establishment of the Buffalo College Success Network**
- **Established paid internship opportunities**, with support via a Professional Skills Seminar
- **Launched apprenticeship program** via CareerWise Great Buffalo

“I think Say Yes has done a really incredible job of helping Buffalo really believe in itself. I think 10 years ago, 15 years ago, Buffalo was at a point of really questioning whether it was ever going to rebound ... And I think part of what has been so great about Say Yes is that [they] showed the city that working together, we could create really positive change and see our city reverse some very negative trends and start to tap into the economic potential that we have right here in our backyard with these young people. And the way they did it was through collaboration. So I think actually one of their biggest outcomes, the biggest impacts that they’ve had has been to lead the way in showing us as a community what we’re really capable of and how to do it, how to make it happen.”

Matthew Giordano,  
Villa Maria College

**What leads education-to-career  
pathway intermediaries to greater  
impact and scale?**



# Intermediaries with the greatest success often have key elements in common

Relationships, trust, and content expertise are commonly referenced as important building blocks for a strong intermediary.

## The most successful intermediaries often include:

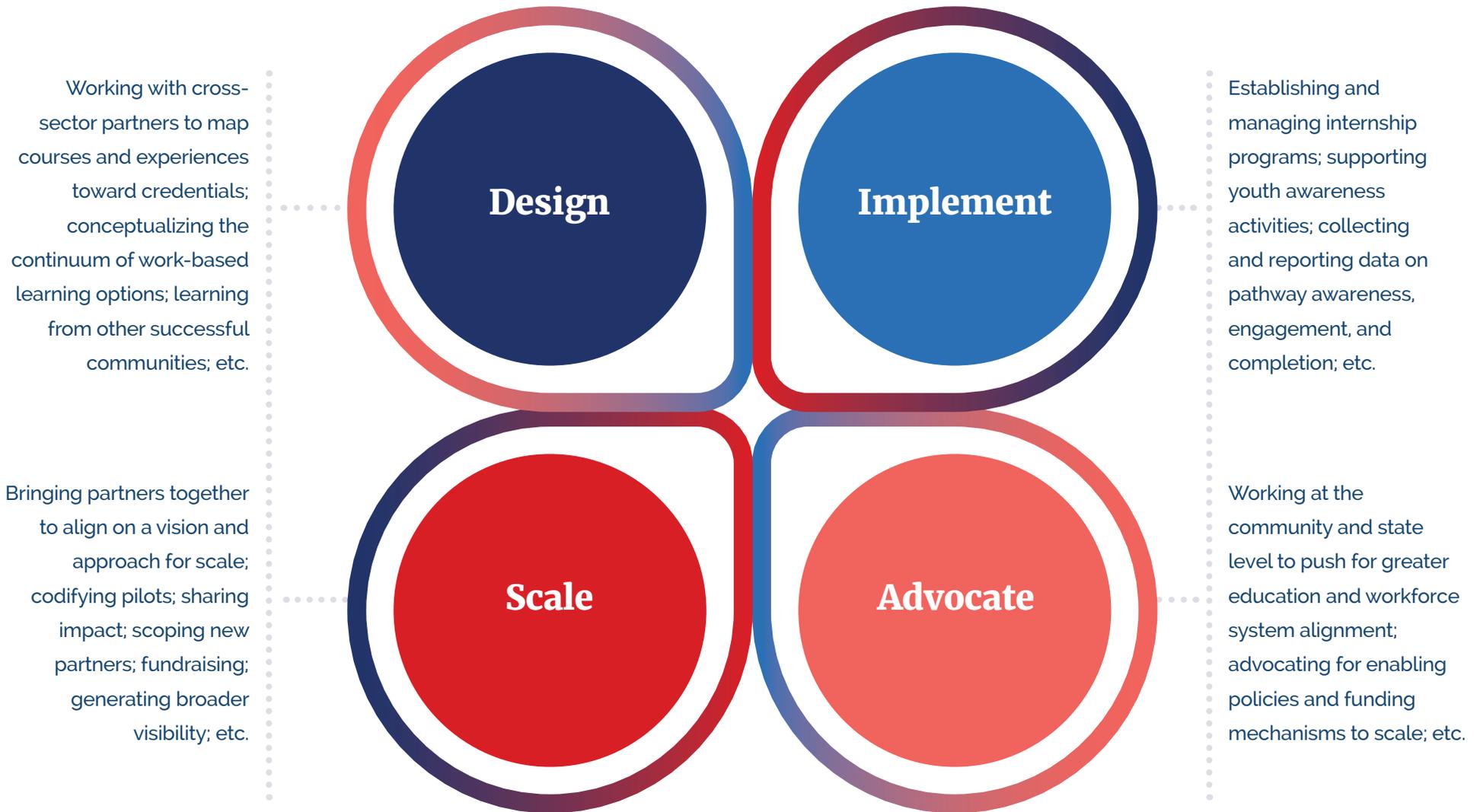
- A highly adept, politically connected leader
- Deep and trusting relationships with leaders across each sector
- Visible authority (i.e. someone/something has designated them to lead)
- Significant expertise in the design and scale of the elements of high-quality pathways
- Core focus on achieving equitable outcomes
- Grounding in and guided by data

## The most successful intermediaries often provide the following value to their community:

- Set a high bar/ensure the quality of pathways
- Keep equity at the forefront of all conversations
- Give employers/sector leaders a single point of connection
- Provide adaptable capacity to meet real-time needs
- Shift narratives about the value pathways
- Lift up student voice, especially students of color and low income backgrounds
- Raise and distribute resources

# Intermediaries evolve to meet the needs of their community over time

Intermediaries develop and evolve to meet the needs of the ecosystems they serve, with key differences in structures, target populations, and approaches based on where they are in the scaling process.



# Education-to-career pathway intermediaries approach scale in four main ways



## State

### SPREAD

Focus on changing enabling conditions to make it easier for communities to prioritize accelerated pathways.

**Example:** Education Systems Center at NIU helped develop Illinois' Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act and created model state pathways.

### DEPTH

Expand particular model(s) or within particular industry sectors in communities that are ripe.

**Example:** Attainment Network and Colorado Succeeds are partnering to replicate a construction pathway in rural communities.



## Region

### SPREAD

Replicate a model in adjacent communities or across the state.

**Example:** The Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce is working with other Chambers to replicate an advanced manufacturing pathway to meet growing industry demand.

### DEPTH

Increase the number of students participating in accelerated pathways in one region.

**Example:** Learn to Earn Dayton (OH) is expanding early outreach, engagement, and advising efforts to increase pathways enrollees.

# Policy conditions play an outsized role in the ability of intermediary organizations to support pathways scale

There is a growing recognition of the value of intermediary organizations, but there is a lot more opportunity for policy to support their work.

- **Policymakers have begun to prioritize the positioning of intermediary organizations within the pathways ecosystem.** These actions have primarily occurred at the state level, and have been focused on building intermediary staff capacity or ecosystem building. There have been pockets of support at the federal and local levels.
- **State legislation and investment to spur the creation or expansion of career pathways has increasingly named the roles that intermediary organizations can and should play** to coordinate cross-sector partners and support program delivery. Examples are provided on the following pages.
- Nonetheless, **stable public sector funding is not yet broadly available to intermediaries, limiting their ability to accelerate impact.** Most intermediaries are heavily reliant on philanthropic funding.
- Public sector actors, employers, policymakers, and other **key actors at the local, state, and national levels need further education about the role that intermediaries play in catalyzing a pathways ecosystem.** This will hopefully lead to greater investment and supportive enabling conditions.



# States are leveraging education-to-career pathway intermediaries to expand pathway access

## CALIFORNIA

The state's Golden State Pathways Program awarded \$470 million in 2024. The grants support cross-sector collaboration between LEAs, IHEs, employers, and other community groups to develop or scale innovative pathways that align with their regional labor market needs. Pathways integrate college prep coursework and the opportunity to earn 12 college credits with career exploration, CTE courses, and work-based learning.



## COLORADO

The state's Opportunity Now program funds regional partnerships between educational institutions, industry leaders, and employers focused on meeting the workforce needs of Colorado's most in-demand industries, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure and construction. The program's \$85 million in grants are designed for organizations and partnerships at various stages of development, from early-stage pilot programs to established, evidence-based programs.



## DELAWARE

The state's Office of Work-Based Learning (OWBL), a Delaware Tech initiative, serves as an employer intermediary supporting LEAs, business, and industry partners to scale vetted work-based learning experiences for secondary and postsecondary students in Delaware. The OWBL is supported through public, private, and philanthropic funding.



# States are investing in the capacity of education-to-career pathway intermediaries to expand impact

## INDIANA

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education launched the \$5 million Intermediary Capacity Building Fund in 2023. The grants provided up to \$250,000 to 20+ intermediary organizations to expand their ability to improve the connection between high schools, students, and employers.



## WASHINGTON

The state funds Career Connect Washington (CCW) to provide the Intermediary Grant Program and the Sector Intermediary Grant program. Both programs support intermediary entities to work with industry and education partners in the development and implementation of career connected learning.



## IOWA

The Iowa Department of Education appropriates \$1.45 million annually (since FY14) for the development and implementation of a statewide work-based learning intermediary network. Each regional Intermediary Network serves as a single, one-stop point of contact by providing work-based learning experiences to school districts in their respective region, with a focus on in-demand industries.



# What stands in the way of maximizing education-to-career pathway intermediaries impact at scale?



# There are a number of current barriers to scaling the impact of education-to-career pathway intermediaries



**No National Support Infrastructure**



**Limited Funding Diversity**



**Lack of Supportive Conditions**



**Pathways Capacity is Thin**



**Inconsistent Impact Reporting**

# There is no national infrastructure for growing the capacity and impact of education-to-career pathway intermediaries

Intermediaries are individually pushing against common challenges and yet no infrastructure currently exists for resource sharing or best practice dissemination.

While intermediaries are adept at swiftly addressing local challenges, they could benefit from a robust national infrastructure that can provide:

- **Peer Learning Opportunities:** Despite the recognized value of peer learning, intermediaries lack a formal network for regular interaction and knowledge sharing (e.g., community of practice, site visits, etc.).
- **Shared Assets:** Intermediaries would benefit from common resources and tools for designing and implementing high-quality pathways, engaging employers, and collecting and reporting impact, etc.
- **Communications and Public Narrative Assistance:** Intermediaries need assistance in crafting messaging for key stakeholders such as students, families, and employers, as well as in storytelling to highlight the impact of their work.
- **Shared Advocacy:** Intermediaries would benefit from a common table to strategize about ways to advocate for the policy and funding environment to provide more support for pathways.

In a recent survey conducted by Visible Networks Lab, intermediary leaders reported that formal connection points are the primary way that intermediaries develop staff, with the most frequently cited approach to staff development being through national networks, communities of practice, site visits, and peer-to-peer relationships.

Visible Network Lab  
Intermediary Survey

# Education-to-career pathway intermediaries are overly reliant on philanthropic funding

Further scale of pathways will likely require a diversification of funding to provide the most integral intermediary functions.

- **Limited Investment:** Currently, there is limited investment from either the public or private sectors in intermediary functions, despite their critical role. As a result, education-to-career pathways intermediaries face significant pressure to prioritize philanthropic fundraising to remain a stable, durable partner.
- **Grant Funding Can Narrow Work:** Philanthropy often favors funding specific programs, which can create tension as intermediary work can extend beyond these programs. Grants typically come with spending restrictions and short durations (1-3 years), forcing organizations to focus on short-term survival and potentially hindering long-term impact. Reliance on this funding stream can lead organizations to pursue “one-off” grants or programs that consume time and capacity of the intermediaries and their partners.
- **Staff Lack Expertise:** Many intermediaries desire a more diversified mix of funds but are unsure how to develop those funding streams. Staff in intermediary organizations often come from government or non-profit backgrounds, and thus do not have the knowledge or experience in developing earned revenue strategies.

**Philanthropy continues to play a significant role in funding intermediary organizations**, with 69% of the organizations analyzed having a single funder who has provided more than one third of their lifetime revenues.

Evan James Analysis, 2023

.....

**“Intermediaries take time to get sustained without philanthropic funding; up to ten years. It’s important the time is given to allow the work to take hold, and get sustained. Intermediaries are most effective when there is seed capital, and shared goals/outcomes among public and private partners.”**

Intermediary Chief  
Impact Officer

# The capacity within education-to-career pathway intermediaries to scale pathways is thin

Many of the most impactful intermediaries remain founder-led and very few opportunities exist growing the capacity of the next set of leaders, which poses a significant threat for sustaining long-term impact.

- **Succession Planning:** The management of relationships is paramount for these organizations to remain durable partners, making leadership transition a significant concern. Succession planning is largely nonexistent, and it can be difficult for organizations to raise funds to support that planning, exacerbating the risk associated with leadership transitions.
- **Limited Leadership Pool:** There are limited opportunities and resources for developing a diverse pool of the next intermediary leadership, and opportunities for peer learning and sharing remain sporadic.
- **Expertise Gap:** Expertise for designing and scaling high-quality pathways for youth ages 14-24 is limited in many communities. Consequently, most pathway intermediaries are still finding their footing in this regard, hindering their ability to drive impactful outcomes.

“The strength and sustainability of a pathways intermediary in rural areas is dependent on their ability to develop strong organizational leadership who were once beneficiaries of the organization.”

Organizational Leader<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>EducationFirst: How Do Intermediary Organizations Support Stronger Pathways Systems?

# Education-to-career pathway intermediaries lack a shared agenda and supportive conditions for scaling their work

Further technical support and codification of best practices is needed to help ease the work of education-to-career pathway intermediaries and amplify their impact. Shared, field level expertise and assets are needed to ensure efficiency and effectiveness.

- **Absence of Common Definition of “Quality”:** In the field, there are currently many definitions regarding the “quality” of career pathways, and the components that make up the pathways (i.e., work-based learning). Intermediaries need assistance in establishing, monitoring, and holding partners accountable for meeting those quality expectations.
- **Combating Inaccurate Narratives:** In some communities, career-connected learning continues to be associated with low-quality opportunities and tracking. Intermediaries need additional support and resources to communicate about the power of career pathways and how they can help youth find long-term economic success.
- **Insufficient Employer Engagement:** While intermediaries have been successful in bringing some employers to the table in their communities, more work needs to be done across the country to expand employer engagement to dramatically scale pathway opportunities.
- **Nascent Policy Infrastructure:** State policy and funding to support the functions of intermediaries in scaling career pathways are sporadic across the country.

In a recent survey conducted by Visible Networks Lab, intermediary leaders reported that they desire more support and resources for data collection & monitoring impact, public narrative change, and employer engagement and support.

Visible Network Lab  
Intermediary Survey

# Education-to-career pathway intermediaries struggle to consistently communicate their impact

While some leading intermediaries are able to report impact, at a national level, impact reporting varies considerably, making it difficult to learn from those achieving greatest impact and replicate promising practices.

- **Inconsistent Reporting:** A number of intermediary organizations co-designed a [measurement framework](#) with Equal Measure, yet few organizations are actually reporting on the identified measures. Reported measures often focus on elements of a pathway (e.g., work-based learning, advanced coursework) rather than the outcomes of a pathway (e.g., completion of a credential, employment).
- **Lack of Standardization:** A lack of standardized reporting across organizations complicates the articulation of intermediaries' impact across communities. Intermediaries frequently report on programmatic metrics tied to short-duration grants (1–3 years), leading to shifting metrics and a focus on short-term over long-term outcomes. This lack of consistency in measures makes it difficult to tell impact stories or learn from those achieving the greatest impact.
- **Underreporting Contributions:** Organizations are sometimes reluctant to take credit for broader system changes or student outcomes, leading to underreporting of their contributions.

“Developing processes related to continuous improvement and responsive change are our greatest opportunities, but will need fundamental mindset shifts related to the purpose of career pathways, how data are collected and used for decision-making, and how business leaders are involved.”

Intermediary VP of  
Education and Talent

# Recommendations to support the dramatic scale of pathways access and success



# Our learnings suggest now is the time to strengthen the field of education-to-career pathway intermediaries

The education-to-career pathway intermediary field is in the Forming Phase, seeking to move to the Evolving & Sustaining Phase. Maturation will require the following:

- **Field-level agenda:** Common goals and principles for the work, with enabling conditions to support it;
- **Actors:** Diverse voices with shared identity and vision;
- **Knowledge base:** Data and information to design, implement, and adapt effective approaches;
- **Infrastructure:** Connective tissue that enhances the efforts of actors by making them more coordinated, connected, and effective; and
- **Resources:** Distribution of financial capital through regranting entities that pool funds and/or new sources of funding.

**FIELD BUILDING:** activities or investments that unlock progress toward greater impact at scale, this can be done through (1) strengthening the organizations in the field and/or (2) improving connections and collaboration.



Source: The Bridgespan Group

# Steps to unlock the power of intermediaries to expand high-quality pathways for all

Intermediaries can and should be force multipliers in their communities for equitable expansion of high-quality pathways. But more is needed to have a field of organizations unlocking scale.

## ESTABLISH NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

There should be a **national infrastructure focused specifically on the capacity and stability of education-to-career pathway intermediaries. This connective tissue could enhance the efforts of individual actors, enabling greater impact across the field.**

The infrastructure should support the following activities:

- Develop and manage a community of intermediary organizations for group learning, sharing and problem solving
- Produce public goods for the field that clearly define the quality elements of career pathways, provide guidance on the roles and responsibilities of intermediaries, promote common data collection and reporting, and codify and showcase successful models
- Set a table for collaboration on policy and funding changes to further scale pathways

## PRIORITIZE DEPTH + SPREAD

- There are a handful of “lighthouse” education-to-career pathway intermediary organizations across the country. Over the past 5-10 years they have demonstrated their impact. **Lighthouse organizations need further catalytic philanthropic, public, and private funding to serve more youth in their own communities and expand their services to new geographies.** And they need help to diversify their funding to decrease reliance on philanthropy over time, and increase public and private sector investment.
- Even with growth of the lighthouse organizations, far too few communities will be served by high-quality education to career intermediary organizations. **Additional technical assistance should be provided to help current youth-serving organizations that are embedded in communities evolve to build and scale high-quality career pathways, translating lessons learned from the “lighthouses.”**

# Steps to unlock the power of intermediaries to expand high-quality pathways for all

## REPOSITION THE ROLE OF PHILANTHROPY

Philanthropy cannot be the long-term funding solution for sustaining intermediary organizations. Rather, **philanthropy should provide catalytic investments to:**

1. **Significantly increase the scale of pathways in target communities serving large numbers of students of color and low-income students**
2. **Support the national infrastructure for learning and sharing among intermediaries**
3. **Fund innovations in program models and the study of their impact**
4. **Help fill gaps in geographies served by education-career pathway intermediaries through technical assistance to support organizational evolution**

## EXPAND SUPPORTIVE CONDITIONS & PUBLIC FUNDING

Efforts need to be taken in states and federally to establish policies and funding that recognizes the critical role that intermediaries play in scaling career pathways. Further advocacy is necessary to **(1) establish dedicated public funding streams for intermediary functions, and/or (2) require intermediary participation in career pathways efforts.** Policymakers also need to invest in cross-sector data systems that enable tracking student outcomes from education to employment, and allow intermediaries to access those data to track and report impact.

## ALIGN ON IMPACT

**Education-to-career pathway intermediaries need to align their efforts on measurement, research, and storytelling.** Although each intermediary works to adapt to the needs of its community, there are common measures that each should be collecting and reporting, including the number of youth successfully completing career pathways that lead to a postsecondary credential with labor market value. **The field would also benefit from further focus on research into what works in establishing and scaling career pathways, especially for students of color and low-income students.** Finally, intermediaries should double down on their efforts to lift up student voice in their programmatic design and communications about impact.

# Toward economic opportunity and mobility for all



"[The biotechnology pathway] is eye-opening. It lets you see what's out there. You don't have to stay in the pathway if you don't want to. You're not forced to keep it. It's just like it aligns with the certain things you want to do. ... That was my big thing, it was more hands-on, and I got to be in the lab and see things happen. ... It's like a preview of what is soon to come. And I know if I do this, it'll be easier to understand in the future."

**High School Student,  
Boston, MA**

**It's time to listen to  
our youth and deliver  
many more pathway  
opportunities.**

"Without [this program] I probably wouldn't be working in the health field. ... I'm living some people's dream already. Yeah, I'm living my dream too."

**Pathway Graduate,  
New Orleans, LA**

"I loved being able to take the hands-on IT classes ... it changed how I thought about my future job."

**College Student,  
Nashville, TN**

"[My pathway] pushed me ahead. I have a lot of adult co-workers asking how I have the level of professionalism and experience at my age. That's provided a feeling of power and confidence to do well and feel prepared."

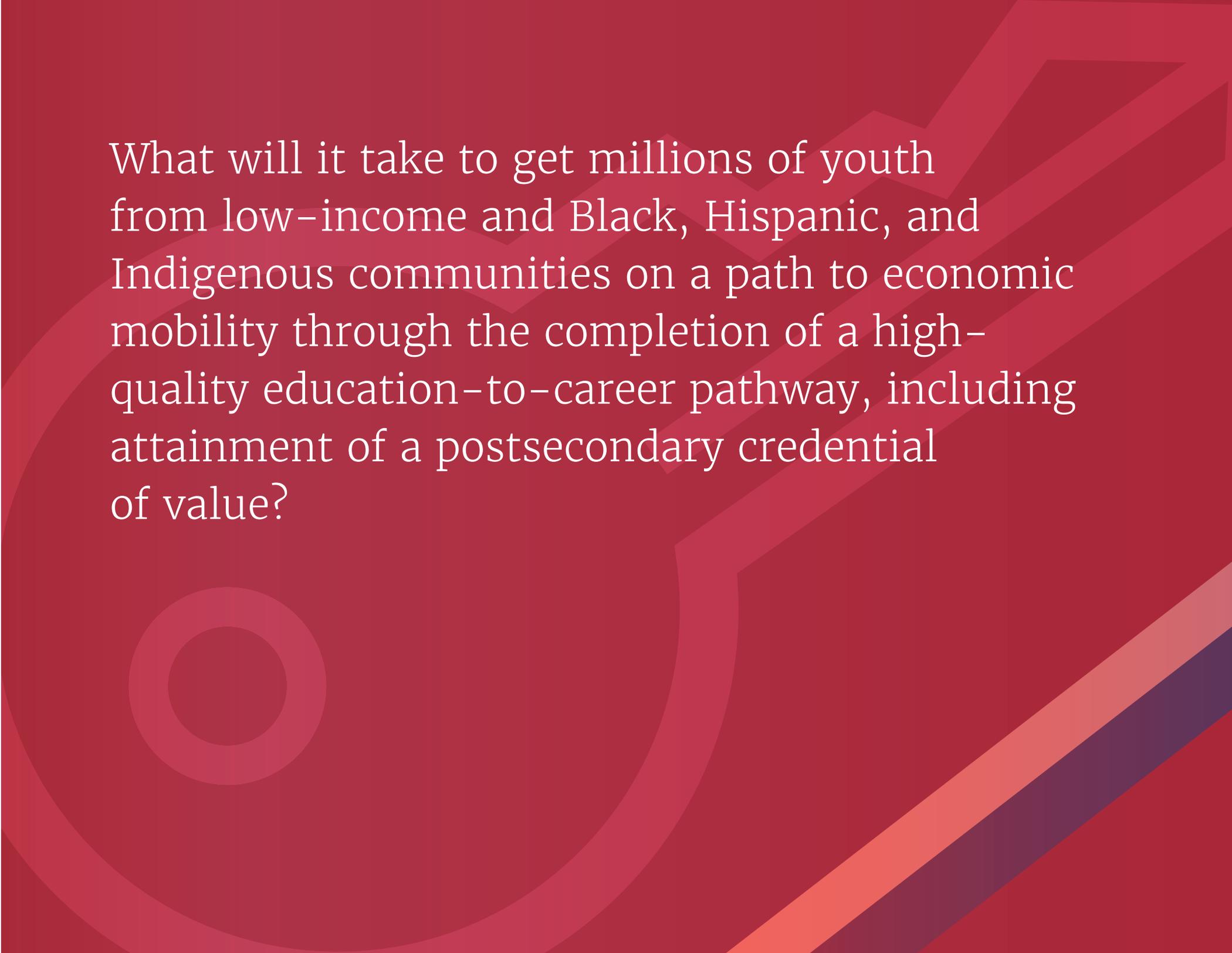
**College Student,  
Denver, CO**

"I know that [through my pathway] whatever I'm doing is actually going to help me in the future. I think it's cool to see life early on."

**High School Student,  
Kettering, OH**

"The connections I've made and the knowledge I've gained throughout the [apprenticeship] program, from my junior year until now, have made this journey both smooth and enjoyable. While the exposure and experience have been incredibly beneficial, it is the networking aspect that stands out as the most pivotal element in my professional development."

**College Student,  
Indianapolis, IN**



What will it take to get millions of youth from low-income and Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous communities on a path to economic mobility through the completion of a high-quality education-to-career pathway, including attainment of a postsecondary credential of value?

# Let's unlock scale

Over the next 10 years, the functions that education-to-career pathway intermediaries provide are the key to deliver on a vision of millions more youth finding long-term success.

These organizations are rapidly adapting and building their capacity, and more support is needed to catalyze their leadership to bring the vision to reality, especially for students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.

**We must move from islands of excellence to a nation of opportunity.**



# Appendix



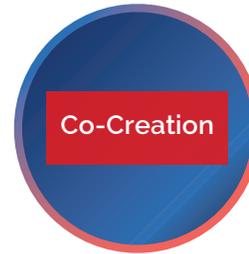
# How ESG built on previous research to develop the recommendations



Reviewed and synthesized previous research on intermediary functions and their contributions to learner outcomes; examined functions, financials, and impact for **50+ organizations**; studied **40+ national and international structures** for organizational capacity building and sustainability.



Conducted **40+ interviews** of organizational leaders to identify the highest impact functions and the most significant barriers to scaling impact; conducted a survey of 35+ organizations to better understand how they work with each other and what supports are needed for efficiently and effectively expanding high quality pathways.



Engaged a **visioning group of 15+ national pathways leaders** and an **advisory group of 15+ state and regional intermediary leaders** to inform and advise on the direction and substance of the proposed solution.



Drew upon internal experience and expertise in working with **50+ intermediary organizations** to design, implement, and scale high-quality education to career pathways.

# Learning from intermediary leaders

As part of our research process, we engaged education-to-career pathways intermediary leadership in over 60 communities.



# Current intermediary reporting on the Equal Measure equitable pathways impact framework recommended measures

Measure	Intermediaries Identified as Priority	Intermediaries Report on Outcomes
High School Enrollment	N/A	N/A
High School Attendance	N/A	N/A
Promotion and Retention in High School	N/A	N/A
Graduation from High School or High School Equivalency	Low	Some
Completion of College and FAFSA Applications	High	Some
Enrollment in Postsecondary Education	High	Some
Promotion and Retention in Postsecondary Education	Medium	Few
Completion of Postsecondary Education	Medium	Few
Successful Career Transition After High School	High	Few

Measure	Intermediaries Identified as Priority	Intermediaries Report on Outcomes
Enrollment in WBL and CTE	High	Some
Enrollment in Advanced and Early College Courses	High	Some
Enrollment in Technical Training Programs	High	Few
Completion of WBL and CTE Programs	High	Few
Industry-Specific Technical Competency Development	High	Few
Certifications or IRC Attainment	High	Few
Soft Skills Development	Medium	Few
Employment in Lifetime or Springboard Jobs	Medium	Few
Wages Post-Graduation	High	Few
Professional and Social Network Development	Medium	Few

Equal Measure [framework](#)

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