

INTERMEDIARY ORIGIN STORY

YOUTHFORCE NOLA

Keys to Scale



YouthForce
NOLA

ESG

Education
Strategy
Group

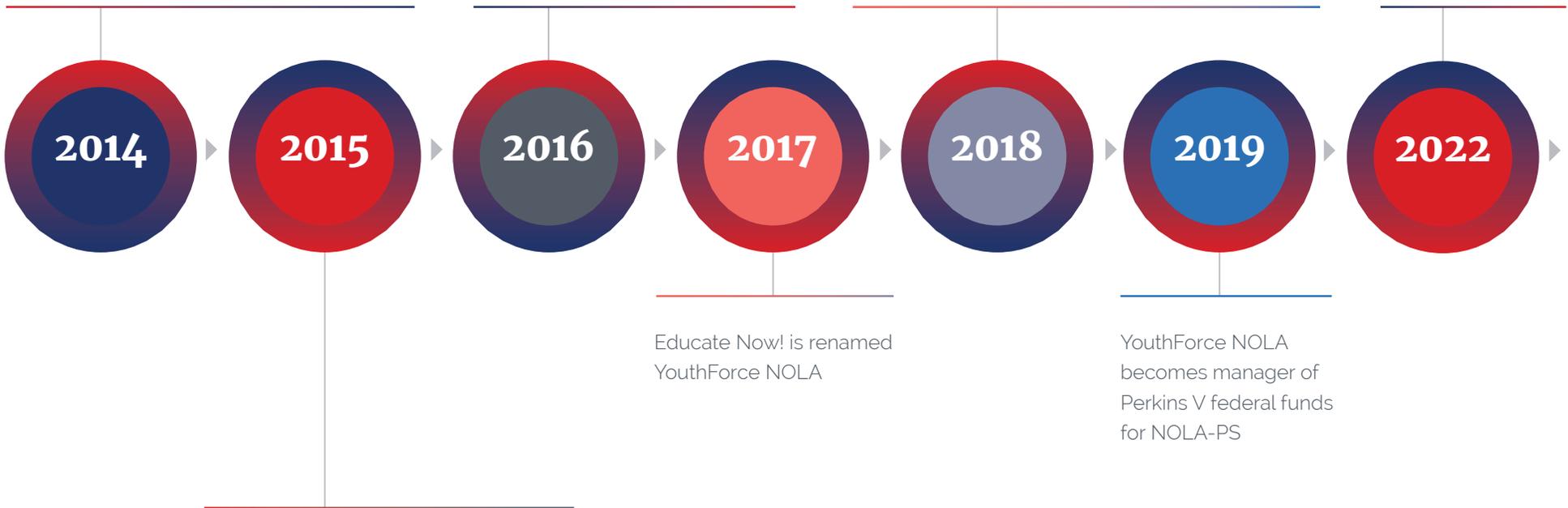
YouthForce NOLA

Educate Now! assembles a task force made up of New Orleans leaders to address racial disparities in youth education, economic, and workforce outcomes post-Hurricane Katrina and the lack of connection between New Orleans public school students and industry

YouthForce NOLA partners with Junior Achievement of Greater New Orleans to establish a career expo and employer hub

YouthForce NOLA supports the launch of New Orleans Career Center, a central hub for students across New Orleans providing job skills training; Director of Policy hired to engage in state-level discussions to bring about better policy and funding conditions to equitably scale pathways

Director of Impact Evaluation hired to monitor and communicate impact across YouthForce's initiatives



A collaborative steering committee is established to build a "YouthForce" strategy anchored by industry-based credentials, work-based learning, and soft skills; YouthForce NOLA Internship launches



What is YouthForce NOLA?

YouthForce NOLA serves as the engine for career-connected learning so New Orleans public school students are ready for college, career, and the future they choose. The organization leads a coordinated network of education, business, and community partners who, together, equip public school students with the skills and know-how they need to confidently pursue a wide range of opportunities after high school. Through its collective efforts, YouthForce NOLA aims to ensure that New Orleans public school graduates can thrive in meaningful, well-paying careers.



YOUTHFORCE NOLA WORKS TO ACHIEVE ITS GOALS BY:

1. Energizing, funding, and making connections to provide career-connected learning, including
 - a. Providing support to local high schools to implement career pathways programs;
 - b. Partnering with local employers to provide work-based learning experiences and inform school programming; and
 - c. Working with occupational skills training providers (such as community colleges and nonprofit training organizations) to expand the number of Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses available to students
2. Advocating for and managing policies and systems that enable career-connected learning
3. Elevating the power and importance of career-connected learning, including engaging families, policy-makers, media, and the community at large

YouthForce NOLA has collaborated across New Orleans's education and workforce ecosystem to develop a cohesive and centralized set of career pathway opportunities for students throughout their teens, including career exposure experiences, technical and soft-skill

building experiences, and real-world work experiences. The organization performs multiple intermediary functions for ecosystem stakeholders including vision setting, convening, raising and distributing funds, and advocacy for policy change.



The Beginning

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent school reforms in New Orleans, efforts to improve the city's schools were beginning to show success, and high-school graduation rates and ACT scores were increasing. However, these improvements were unequally felt across the city, and significant racial disparities persisted.

At the same time, local businesses had a growing number of available jobs but were not able to fill them with local talent. There was a mismatch between the preparation that students received in school and local job opportunities. The key issue to address was not high school dropout rates but the challenge of connecting students to employment opportunities, as indicated by the fact that two-thirds of young people in New Orleans had a high school diploma or some college but were not effectively connected to jobs.

In response, in 2014, a business leader and philanthropist who chaired a nonprofit called Educate Now!, along with an experienced district leader and fundraiser, pulled together a group of business, civic, and community leaders, including representatives from the local economic development organizations, the school board, the state education department, a couple of local and national funders, the Urban League, the Junior Achievement affiliate, and other organizations to meet over a series of months to plan how to solve the problem. Based mainly on what the group was hearing from employers, they developed a strategy called YouthForce NOLA, which focused on industry-based credentials, work-based learning, and soft skills.¹

“...We have had, from our very inception, a demand-driven strategy. We are focused on creating pathways for real jobs, not phantom jobs.”

Melissa Ehlinger
Chief of External Affairs,
YouthForce NOLA

Different organizations use different terminology (“soft,” “professional,” “common,” “essential,” etc.) to describe this particular set of skills, which include such skills as communication, teamwork, time management, adaptability, problem-solving, and more.



A collaborative steering committee of over a dozen entities was established to work on the YouthForce strategy. Fundraising efforts were also initiated. To launch, the group secured initial funding from JPMorgan Chase Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Walton Family Foundation, and the City of New Orleans.

YouthForce initially launched as an initiative of Educate Now!. The experienced district leader became the effort's founding President & CEO and many members of the initial group continue to serve on its collaborative steering committee. In 2017, the group took over the 501(c)(3) from Educate Now! and became YouthForce NOLA. The board chair of Educate Now! became YouthForce NOLA's board chair, and the organization's Board of Directors was otherwise reconstituted to more fully reflect local industry.

At the outset, YouthForce NOLA leaned into its role as a convener and relationship builder. It was clear that YouthForce NOLA's goal involved systems-level change, and no one entity could do this alone. Much of the early work involved getting disparate stakeholders in one room to develop and agree upon a strategy. In the New Orleans school district, there is not a traditional CTE

office that coordinates on behalf of all the schools. Some schools are standalone, while charter management organizations run others. Each school or charter management group that runs a group of schools is essentially its own district, with its own leadership and budget authority. In other words, the school system in New Orleans is composed of multiple stakeholders. In order to be successful YouthForce NOLA needed to forge relationships with schools one by one and take on some of the roles of a traditional CTE office.

As an intermediary, YouthForce NOLA could also raise funds on behalf of the collective and then distribute those funds through subgrants to schools, training providers, and non-profit organizations that provide services and programs to New Orleans students. This fundraising model was quite novel in New Orleans and was integral to the early success of the collective. As Claire Jecklin, Founding CEO of the New Orleans Career Center, and at the time a principal of a high performing high school, describes, "The incentivizing around engagement through philanthropic dollars and resources for education was a huge shift and really important in helping move people along."

"...the...role of an intermediary is to ensure that we have a collective impact and a set of initiatives that are aligned and a group of partners who are working towards the same goal as the intermediary. And in this case, that's how I see our relationship."

Claire Jecklin
CEO and Founder,
New Orleans Career Center



Cohesion and Centralization

YouthForce NOLA Internship

In 2015, YouthForce NOLA started with one of the more time-consuming and resource-heavy career-connected learning opportunities: an internship program. Because research showed that internships positively impact students and employers, YouthForce NOLA hypothesized that an internship program would give employers an important and necessary opportunity to see and experience first-hand working with students in the city.

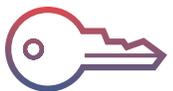
The YouthForce Internship is a paid work-based learning program that involves paid work readiness and soft skills training, one-on-one coaching, and an internship with a local company. YouthForce NOLA developed a curriculum and runs the program on behalf of all New Orleans schools. During the 60-hour training stage of the YouthForce NOLA

Internship, students are taught a variety of soft skills and career development topics, ranging from professional attire to calendar management, that prepare them for the world of work. During their 90-hour internship, students learn more about potential careers, gain valuable work experience, internalize soft skills, and network with people in a fast-growing, high-wage industry.

In the first year, YouthForce NOLA supported under 20 interns. By 2020, the program was on track to have 250 summer interns. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, YouthForce NOLA shifted to a virtual format. YouthForce NOLA Internship returned to in-person programming in Summer 2022.

“I think we’re a little bit different than some other communities in that we started with internships, which are the most intensive, biggest lift, biggest ask of employers and most intense for the young people.”

Melissa Ehlinger
Chief of External Affairs,
YouthForce NOLA



Junior Achievement of Greater New Orleans

YouthForce NOLA recognized that pathways need to start with young people becoming aware of what career opportunities are available to them as early as possible, well before internships were an option. In 2017, partnering with Junior Achievement of Greater New Orleans (JAGNO), YouthForce NOLA established a Career Expo and Employer Hub.

The Career Expo gathers high school freshmen from public schools across the city to expose them to high-wage, high-demand career pathways. This expo is now a yearly occurrence, with the 2024 Expo involving hands-on experiences with 60–80 business partners and training providers, including institutions of higher education, reaching 2,000–3,000 students.

The Employer Hub, facilitated by JAGNO, coordinates and establishes schools' connections with various high-demand industries. Using the Hub, a classroom teacher can contact JAGNO and request the type of career engagement that fits their needs, from job shadowing opportunities to requesting a classroom speaker. JAGNO also handles the logistics: getting all the permission slips, working with the school to arrange transportation, and liaising with the employer.

The Hub represents a simplified process for creating career-connected learning experiences for teachers and schools. For employers, the Hub manages the flow of requests so that no one employer is inundated with dozens of requests.

“So the idea behind the hub is that a classroom teacher can reach out to us and say, I would love a black female engineer to come into my engineering class and talk to my students. I would love for a set of professionals to come in and be judges for our entrepreneurship class. I want to take my carpentry kids out to a job site — help me coordinate it.”

Larry Washington
President and CEO,
Junior Achievement of
Greater New Orleans



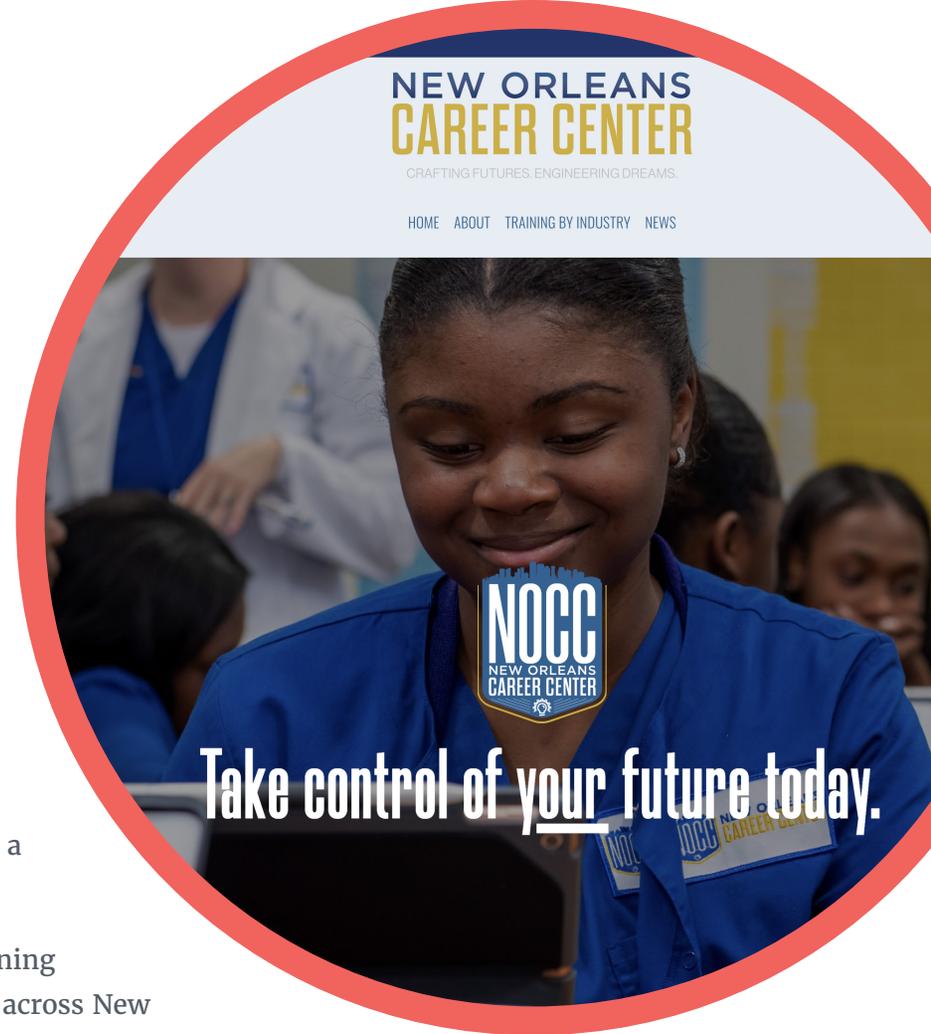
New Orleans Career Center

In parallel with the YouthForce NOLA Internship, YouthForce NOLA was also enacting a school support strategy. Through a competitive RFP process, YouthForce NOLA selected schools to receive funding and technical assistance through third-party partners to develop curricula that taught career awareness and developed career pathways programs of study.

Reaching every school presented logistical hurdles that created both cost and equity concerns. It was difficult to find the required number of quality instructors, particularly in advanced technical training. The technical tools required at every site weren't possible to place: welding bays and top-of-the-line digital media centers were too expensive. Transportation also proved to be a barrier; there is no city-wide yellow school bus system in New Orleans, and public transportation in the city is unreliable, infrequent, and not always accessible.

In collaboration with other city actors, YouthForce NOLA researched and designed a solution.

The New Orleans Career Center (NOCC), launched in 2017 as a non-profit and opening doors to students in late summer 2018, is a central hub for public school students across New Orleans that provides quality job-specific skills training. Through partnerships with schools, students from across New Orleans are able to access the NOCC's training programs: daily half-day, high school technical training, credit-bearing coursework focused on career exploration, industry opportunities, technical and soft skills, and attaining industry-validated credentials. The NOCC offers learning experiences in high-demand careers like building trades, culinary arts and hospitality management, digital media, engineering, and healthcare. All of the pathways at NOCC now also offer opportunities for students to earn college credit. The Career Center has expanded the city's capacity to provide job training by removing barriers particular to the New Orleans ecosystem and improving access while promoting consistency and quality.



Soft Skills

From the beginning, employers were clear that “soft skills” were important. The early days of the YouthForce NOLA Internships made it clear that young people needed support to develop them.

There was, however, no universal agreement on what soft skills are. YouthForce NOLA set out to identify a soft skills framework from which it could devise a shared language—again in partnership with a cross-sector group of organizations from across the city. They ultimately found and selected MHA Lab’s Skill Building Blocks framework and materials. After piloting the MHA Labs Hirability Assessment with young people in their internships, YouthForce NOLA built out a series of workshops and programs for teachers and technical training providers so that they could integrate the soft skills framework into their respective curricula. This continuity has helped to ensure that teachers and employers across the city are using the same language and tools to describe and teach these skills to students.

“What we were seeing is that young people were having trouble in their internship, not because they weren’t talented or interested in the work, it was just they didn’t know what to do when the bus broke down.”

Melissa Ehlinger
Chief of External Affairs,
YouthForce NOLA



Impact

YouthForce NOLA has contributed to measurable change in New Orleans, even as it has continuously expanded its programs and work to address barriers it encounters in the New Orleans ecosystem. While longitudinal analyses are not yet available, current data shows that YouthForce NOLA's comprehensive efforts have impacted the city's pathways ecosystem in tangible ways.

“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 and CEO, JAGNO

17,000

students have participated in career education programs

350

educators have been directly trained to incorporate soft skills in their classrooms

3,340

New Orleans' educators have directly impacted 3,340 students through the Soft Skills Teacher Fellowship

3,044

industry credentials earned across all high school grades

1,200+

students have completed paid YouthForce NOLA Internships

YouthForce NOLA's successes have also led to the type of mindset change that is a critical part of getting and keeping New Orleans's pathways stakeholders at the table in the future.



Looking Ahead

Increasingly, YouthForce NOLA has focused its attention on shaping and influencing policies that support its goals in the city. Inefficient policies are one barrier to the scaling and sustainability of YouthForce NOLA programs. In 2018, YouthForce NOLA hired a Director of Policy who works with policymakers at the local, state and federal levels. Because YouthForce NOLA represents a collective of organizations and institutions, it is better able to leverage its voice to advocate for improvements to systems that would make developing youth pathways easier for everyone.

Another barrier to scaling is Louisiana's restrictions on sharing student data. Currently, the Workforce Commission cannot share data with the Department of Education or the Department of Revenue, making it difficult to collect data across a student's pathways experience. To address this inefficiency, YouthForce NOLA hired a Director of Impact Evaluation in 2023.

“I foresee YouthForce NOLA being able in the next five years, 10 years, to move further into the policy space and start to really change things from a high level system perspective and not having to be so tactical on the ground.”

Larry Washington
President and CEO, JAGNO