ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS TO SUPPORT THE SCHOOL TO WORKFORCE PIPELINE IN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Prepared for AASA, The School Superintendents Association

At its core, the school to workforce pipeline is a pathway from parental care to employment. Between these stages is education, much of which school districts, higher education institutions, and organizations with technical training provide.[1] However, rural districts face multiple location-specific challenges when supporting students along this pipeline (e.g., potential health and safety issues, lack of infrastructure, small businesses with limited capacity, substantial distances to travel).[2] Given these and other obstacles to students' post-secondary success, this resource presents strategies for rural districts looking to partner with community organizations to support the school to workforce pipeline.

SUMMARIZING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP STRATEGIES

KEY FINDINGS

Establishing community partnerships comprises one element of a larger pipeline that supports students' workforce readiness. The school to workforce pipeline begins with children learning from their parents, followed by K-12 education, higher education and technical training, and workforce employment. However, this standard pipeline differs as individuals follow various paths and have unique experiences in K-12 education (e.g., traditional schooling, dual enrollment, dropout), higher education and technical training (e.g., certificates, two-year degrees, four-year degree, professional or graduate degrees), and workforce employment (e.g., low-wage jobs, high-wage jobs, unemployment, entrepreneurial ventures). With various paths to employment, districts' partnerships can support all students' advancement through the pipeline.

Districts must act internally and externally to ensure community partnerships are successful. Important internal action steps include establishing a vision for partnerships, researching local needs and potential partners, and selecting a community partnership liaison. Alternatively, external action steps include networking and meeting with potential partners, confirming partners' commitment, promoting partnership opportunities throughout the community, and evaluating program outcomes alongside partners to ensure mutual benefits.

District leaders and pipeline stakeholders must understand local needs, context, and resources to ensure that partnerships are sustainable and mutually beneficial. This understanding requires districts to explore the industries and transferable skills that will provide stability in terms of wages, benefits, and job security. Notably, human, as opposed to repetitive, skills are increasingly relevant for the workforce. These skills include creativity, communication, project management, and empathy, among others.

Communication between a district and its community is vital to establishing and maintaining successful partnerships with businesses, institutions of higher education, and other community organizations. Such communication may occur through initial meetings between district and organization leaders to discuss goals and partnership contributions and through a district's community liaison who manages partner recruitment, school access, student participation, and other tasks. Districts should also communicate partnership successes as a promotional tool. Conveying partnership results (e.g., impact on students' postsecondary outcomes) shows the mutual benefits of these programs and may entice new organizations to engage with their local school district.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings, Hanover Research suggests that rural school district leaders:

Commission a labor market analysis to identify emerging sectors and jobs in the district's local, regional, and state communities to ensure partnerships and pipeline opportunities align with current and anticipated needs.

Hire or designate a partnership liaison at the district or school level to manage community partnerships that support the school to workforce pipeline and ensure all operational and administrative needs (e.g., planning, recruiting, communicating) occur in a timely and well-executed manner.

Create a communication plan for how the district will engage with current partners, potential partners, and other community stakeholders (e.g., families, district staff, local officials) to support local needs; promote partnerships as effective school to workforce pipeline tools; and celebrate student, district, and community successes.
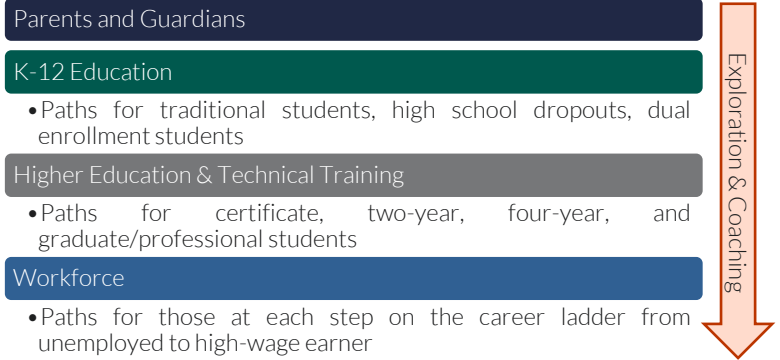
UNDERSTANDING PIPELINE PROCESSES AND PARTNERSHIPS

FOUNDATIONS OF SCHOOL TO WORKFORCE PIPELINES

The school to workforce pipeline, illustrated to the right, is vital to the availability of ready-to-work employees and economic development. This pipeline also provides **a framework for how community members, organizations, and structures all impact the workforce.**[3]

One holistic model that supports the school to workforce pipeline and is broad enough to enable community stakeholders from any sector to engage is the Breakthrough Model 2.0.[4] This model, designed to advance Arkansas' communities, comprises the four steps in the figure to the right. The steps aim to facilitate community member and leader participation, asset-based mindsets, solutions to significant barriers, and collaboration. As a result, communities can identify and leverage their strengths to advance their communities in tangible ways.[5] The following pages go deeper into school to workforce pipeline strategies, focusing on those that districts can implement to create partnerships that promote students' preparation for working in their native, rural communities.

WORKFORCE PIPELINE

Parents and Guardians

K-12 Education
- Paths for traditional students, high school dropouts, dual enrollment students

Higher Education & Technical Training
- Paths for certificate, two-year, four-year, and graduate/professional students

Workforce
- Paths for those at each step on the career ladder from unemployed to high-wage earner

Exploration & Coaching

Source: University of Arkansas System Cooperative Extension Service[6]

BREAKTHROUGH MODEL 2.0

Discover — Trends, Assets, and Key Drivers
Dream — Describe Your Desired Future
Design — Identify Key Priorities
Deliver — Strategies and Action Plans

Source: University of Arkansas System Cooperative Extension Service[7]

STRUCTURES AND SKILLS OF SCHOOL TO WORKFORCE PIPELINE PARTNERSHIPS

How students learn and what skills they develop as a result of district-community partnerships (e.g., career and technical education courses, apprenticeships) vary widely. Notably, industry trends show that **"human" skills are surpassing "repetitive" skills** that technology replaces in jobs; and partnership opportunities and key skills reflect communities' and society's advancing landscapes and local goals held by districts and employers.[8]

SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP EXAMPLES

- CTE and other co-developed coursework
- Dual enrollment with community and technical colleges
- Apprenticeship and internship programs
- Job-shadowing opportunities and field trips
- Place-based education

Source: Multiple[9]
Note: This is not an exhaustive list, and districts and members may implement other innovative opportunities aligned with their vision and goals for students and their community.

STUDENT SKILLS FOR RURAL WORKFORCE SUCCESS

- ❖ Problem solving
- ❖ Creativity
- ❖ Project management
- ❖ Listening
- ❖ Moral and ethical decision making
- ❖ Strategic decision making
- ❖ Communication
- ❖ Persuasion
- ❖ Personal service
- ❖ Empathy

Source: Salida School District R-32 and the Chaffee County Economic Development Corporation[10]

PREPARING FOR PARTNERSHIPS

NETWORK AND COMMUNICATE YOUR VISION

Districts must build their network of potential community partners and convey their vision for students and partnerships. This initial phase of establishing community partners can help to develop working relationships with like-minded organizations and demonstrate how the district can meet community needs.[11] District leaders and staff may network across many sectors and with contacts who work in education, engage in workforce development, or are dedicated to improving student and employee success in their community:[12]
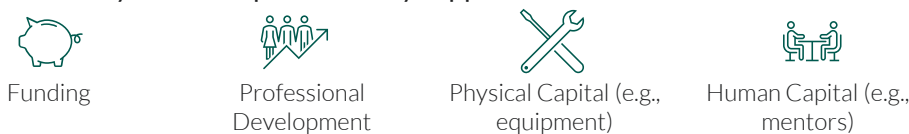
Agriculture and Forestry	Business—Retail and Other	Religious Groups and Human Services	Health Care and Other Services
Local Government	Manufacturing	Media	Education

UNDERSTAND NEEDS AND RESOURCES

Building pathways towards sustainable careers requires education leaders to identify growing industries and those that can provide stable wages, benefits, and job security. Knowing what industries and *transferable* skills are important in one's community is critical for creating curricula and partnerships that align with multiple sectors and organizations. Connecting with the local Chamber of Commerce and reviewing information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics can be effective starting points for exploring key industries and networking.[14] Notably, district leaders must also identify their students' and schools' needs and whether community partnerships can address needs, expand student experiences, and serve as mutually beneficial unions in the school to workforce pipeline.[15] Ways in which partners may support education needs include:[16]

Funding	Professional Development	Physical Capital (e.g., equipment)	Human Capital (e.g., mentors)

IDENTIFY PARTNERS AND SOLIDIFY COMMITMENTS

"The death of most education initiatives is not a lack of planning, but of commitment."[19]

District leaders should research and meet with potential partners to ensure that such organizations express their commitment to the partnership.[20] Identification requires leaders to assess organizations' purposes, community involvement, financial health, local interests, and other relevant insights.[21] With a list of appropriate partners in mind, district leaders should meet with those organizations to solidify both parties' commitment to supporting schools and the community through the agreed-upon contributions and time.[22] Best practices for planning partnerships and ensuring commitment are to:[23]

❖ Determine how a partnership experience could enhance the education experience;

❖ Identify potential partners;

❖ Understand your core values and those of your potential partner; and

❖ Draft a partnership proposal.

Spotlight: Chaffee County, Colorado

In Chaffee County, Colorado, Salida School District identified a need for new facilities at roughly the same time the Chaffee County Economic Development Corporation recognized a need for workforce development to support the changing technology landscape. Conversations soon began between the two organizations about the additional value of higher education on post-secondary employment as well as the importance of fiscal resources and experiential opportunities. This dialogue, and input from funding sources, led to "a partnership based on shared interests, a common vision, and mutual goals."[13]

Spotlight: Roscoe, Texas

Roscoe, Texas addressed the gap between academically successful students and career-ready graduates by creating "regionally relevant" education that prepares students for working in and around Roscoe.[17] District leaders identified the need for veterinarians to care for livestock, technicians to repair and assess wind turbines, and other energy and healthcare workers. Knowing local needs, the district connected with local businesses and universities to establish the pathway-based education system Collegiate Edu-Nation with college credit options and technical courses. The program has since expanded to other districts, serving as a model for multiple Texas districts and communities.[18]

The 5 C's of Successful School-Community Partnerships:[24]

Common Purpose

Complementary Content

Communication

Customized Partnership

Continuous Improvement and Sustainability

COLLABORATING WITH PARTNERS

LEVERAGE LIAISONS AND COLLABORATORS

Designated liaisons or coordinators can serve as key stakeholders in effective district-community partnerships as they facilitate communication and operational needs and smooth potentially-contrasting cultures across a district and its community.[25] Often, superintendents take on larger roles in beginning conversations with potential partners because they may have deep connections within their community and know key stakeholders due to relationships from former executive board positions. However, time and skillset may be reasons for establishing a designated position for recruiting partners, communicating needs, distributing funding, providing administrative assistance, and ensuring instructional needs are met.[26]

"Maintaining strong partnerships often involved the creation of new, collaborative structures, such as advisory or stakeholder teams, to ensure frequent communication among the partnering entities and to provide guidance and oversight for their joint efforts."[27]

A Sample of District-Community Liaisons' Roles & Responsibilities:[28]

- ❖ Facilitates the implementation of partnerships and volunteer programs;
- ❖ Creates opportunities for community partners and school staff to collaborate;
- ❖ Oversees partner programming recruitment, training, implementation, student and classroom scheduling, evaluation, adjusting, and coaching;
- ❖ Oversees student and staff attendance logistics for programs; and
- ❖ Purchases necessary materials for programs with available funds.

SHARE SUCCESSES AND CELEBRATE PIPELINE PARTNERSHIPS

Sharing successes from partnerships recognizes student and collaborator efforts while exhibiting partnerships for other organizations to see. Such promotional activities can help increase awareness and build support.[29] Special events and local announcements provide platforms for disseminating outcomes, and districts should celebrate partnerships both publicly and privately to demonstrate appreciation.[30] Opportunities to celebrate student growth and partnership outcomes as well as expand awareness include:[31]

Hosting student & parent celebrations

Presenting at a board meeting

Describing results in local publications

Distributing a brochure

Organizing a lunch for partners & elected officials

Contacting local media outlets

Spotlight: Berkeley County, South Carolina

In Berkeley County School District, 12 high school students engaged in a home health program through a partnership with a local home health business. Following the eight-week program, all students passed the final assessment and many continued to work for the business owner as full-time employees or paid mentees due to their ages. The school celebrated the students' and business' success through a family celebration, board meeting recognition, and announcements in a local newsletter, website, newspaper, and other platforms. Following the celebrations, other businesses contacted the high school to engage in a workforce development program.[32]

REPLICATE AND LIMIT PARTNERSHIPS APPROPRIATELY

When establishing partnerships that support the school to workforce pipeline, districts should be clear about their community contributions without taking ownership for sustaining the community. In other words, partnerships must maintain "distributive ownership" so that no one party becomes responsible for sustaining a society.[33] At the same time, partnerships that are successful and provide a continuous resource for students and employers should be replicated; and districts should adapt beneficial partnerships in other community contexts.[34] To ensure partnership effectiveness, schools and organizations must engage in a formal evaluation process. These evaluations may depend on the size of partners or partnerships, as shown below:[35]

Larger Partnership Evaluations
- ❖ Participant survey administration
- ❖ Formal meetings with all partnership stakeholders

Small Partnership Evaluations
- ❖ Informal monitoring and data collection
- ❖ Brief phone calls between district and organization leaders

Spotlight: North Carolina

The North Carolina Community College System partners with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to operate a dual enrollment program.[36] To maintain accountability and monitor results, regular evaluations assess the outcomes below:[37]

- ❖ The impact of dual enrollment on high school completion;
- ❖ The academic achievement & performance of dually enrolled students;
- ❖ The number of students who complete college certificates while dually enrolled;
- ❖ The impact of dual enrollment & certificates on college enrollment; and
- ❖ The persistence/completion rates & academic achievement/performance of high school graduates who enter college.

The following discussion guide provides district leaders with questions that facilitate conversations among community leaders, university staff, and potential business partners regarding school-community partnerships. Leaders may ask these specific questions or use these questions as inspiration for questions that reflect their district and community context in a more nuanced way.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS DISCUSSION GUIDE

QUESTIONS	NOTES
In what ways do our visions, missions, and goals converge? In what ways do they diverge?	
In what ways would working with our district benefit you? How could you support our district in developing students' skills to meet industry needs?	
What resources would you need to engage in a school to workforce pipeline partnership? What resources could you offer?	
How do you anticipate your sector/industry evolving? How might our district support students to ensure they are successful during these changes?	
How do you prefer to communicate (e.g., method of communication, frequency, point of contact)?	
Have you supported workforce development programs before? If so, how did you determine whether they were successful?	
Do you envision partnering with our district as a one-time program or an ongoing initiative?	

Source: Multiple[38]

ENDNOTES

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