

College and Career Pathways Designed to Serve All Students



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EDITOR’S NOTE

As the economy evolves and technology reshapes the workplace, educators and leaders are rethinking how schools prepare students for life after graduation. These articles explore a growing push to expand **career-connected learning through stronger career and technical education programs, high-tech training aligned with industry needs, and the integration of emerging tools like AI.** District leaders, employers, and policymakers emphasize that **meaningful work-based experiences**—internships, career pathways, and community partnerships—can help students see the relevance of their learning while building **real-world skills.** From superintendents transforming local resources into career launchpads to national efforts that extend learning beyond school walls, these articles highlight a shared goal: ensuring all students, including those not headed to college, graduate with **clear pathways, practical skills, and opportunities for the future.**

Danielle Villasana for Education Week



Jaclyn Borowski/Education Week

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Angela Piazza/Dallas Morning News via TNS

Adaora Umeh and daughter Weluchu Umeh, a sophomore, learn about a digitized cadaver used by dental students Makaylen Martinez, center left, and Katie Pham, right, during an open house at a Garland ISD career and technical education center in Garland, Texas. Districts around the country are partnering with colleges and local employers to offer students more learning opportunities connected to future careers.

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Schools Must Prepare for Jobs Of the Future, Superintendents Say

By Evie Blad

Schools must develop new approaches to prepare students for jobs in changing local workforces, superintendents say.

District leaders from around the country will gather this week to compare notes on how to build partnerships with local industries, provide students with experiences linked to future careers, and navigate new developments with artificial intelligence.

It's all part of a growing emphasis on work-based learning and career and technical education that more students are demanding and that can help them finish high school with a professional credential and potential job connections.

Such strategies are a key focus of the annual National Conference on Education, hosted in Nashville by AASA, the School Superintendents Association, from Wednesday to Saturday. The theme of this year's event is "the future is ready," with speakers focused on "embracing innovation and equipping students, staff, and community with the tools

and essential skills they need to thrive in a fast-changing world," the organization said in a news release.

The discussions come as public schools seek to prove their value in a world of increasing education options and help students plan earlier for future careers.

"It's really about making sure that all students have a pathway," said Kristine Gilmore, AASA's chief leadership and learning officer and a former superintendent. "It's not only about learning the best research, but seeing districts that put it into practice."

Among the sessions:

- Leaders of the Sheridan, Wyo., district teamed up with a coalition of districts and a community college to allow students to earn English/language arts credits for work-based learning experiences. The credit allows a wider variety of students to participate, helping schools reach disengaged students who may benefit from hands-on learning, leaders said.

- Superintendents from Pennsylvania and California integrated financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and "life skills" into their schools' curricula.
- Leaders from the Delavan-Darien School District in Delavan, Wisc., partnered with local employers to give students out-of-school experiences. For example, students interested in the trades partnered with local contractors to remodel a farm house.
- Administrators from Talladega County, Ala., schools created a career pathway for students interested in cybersecurity careers.
- Superintendents will share how to build career-connected learning programs in rural schools.

Superintendents collaborate to rethink career readiness

College- and career-ready efforts not only prepare students for the future, they also help them remain engaged in the present, said Nick Polyak, the superintendent of the 3,500-student Leyden Community High School District north of Chicago, where students select coursework that aligns with a menu of possible career pathways and earn professional credentials before graduation.

"We all know that for kids, they need that hook to what they are passionate about," he said.

Polyak serves on a cohort of superintendents that has met for months to develop action plans, self-assessments, and recommendations for districts interested in helping students connect their education to future careers, and nurturing traits like resilience and relationship skills. That cohort is part of AASA's Public Education Promise, an initiative that also includes separate working groups focused on student-centered learning, business and community partnerships, measuring success, and recruiting and retaining employees.

Polyak seeks to offer districts lessons that are flexible enough to apply to their own local contexts. In his district, students show great interest in skilled manufacturing jobs that are plentiful in the region, but other communities will need plans to connect to their own local industries and identify needs, he said.

"We live in one of the most advanced manufacturing hubs in the country, and kids can

go earn six figures if they want right out of high school,” Polyak said. “The program we are running here makes perfect sense, but it might not make sense in the next district over.”

He will co-lead a conference session Thursday on how superintendents can navigate challenges and steer their districts through change.

Working groups from the Public Education Promise have already started sharing resources with AASA members, Gilmore said, and more will come after the conference.

“We hope that people leave with pieces they can put into action immediately,” Gilmore said. “It’s really about identifying who is doing great work and making sure we can scale that work across the country.” ■

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How Can Educators Support Students Not Going to College?

By Jennifer Vilcarino

More students are taking a non-traditional path, skipping a four-year college in favor of community college, on-the-job training, or career-technical education.

As the number of non-college-bound students increases, so must the options and level of support, conversation, and connection, said panelists on a wide-ranging virtual webinar hosted by Widehall, a consulting firm based in the District of Columbia.

As a result, education leaders across the ideological spectrum are pushing to make high school a place that offers both college readiness and career prep.

“High school should no longer be simply college prep,” said Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, the largest teachers’ union, during the June 4 webinar. Underscoring the bipartisan nature of interest in expanding career prep, Weingarten, who was heavily criticized by Republicans over her union’s role in school reopenings during the pandemic, was joined by an official from the U.S. Department of Education and a Democratic U.S. House representative.

Data on students’ trajectories underscore the point. According to a 2023 report by the Institute of Education Sciences, the statistical division of the Education Department, universities and colleges have experienced a 15% decline in enrollment between 2010 and 2021. Meanwhile, 63% of students are open to community college, on-the-job training, or a career and technical education instead of a four-year school after high school in 2023 according to a survey by the Educational Credit Management Corporation (ECMC) Group and Vice Media.

Weingarten and other experts emphasized that there needs to be a bigger collaboration between high schools, colleges and universities, and employers to bring non-college-bound students other career opportunities.

“How do we connect kids to their future starting in high school and create more responsibility for everybody?” she asked.

Roadblocks for non-college-bound students

Non-college-bound students feel less prepared for the future than students intending to



Greg Eans/The Messenger-Inquirer via AP

Carter Crabtree, a Daviess County High School junior, learns to stack landscaping blocks with a mini excavator at a demonstration set up by Barnard Landscaping during the Homebuilder Association of Owensboro’s annual Construction Career Day in Owensboro, Ky. Leaders in education discuss how career-tech education programs can support non-college-bound students, in an online webinar.

pursue an associate’s or bachelor’s degree—40% versus 54%, respectively—according to a 2024 Walton Family Foundation-Gallup survey.

One reason for this gap is the lack of exposure to different career paths. “When people are unemployed, it is not because they are malingering out of the labor force, but because they don’t know how to connect with opportunity,” said Nick Moore, the deputy assistant secretary of the office of career, technical, and adult education at the Department of Education.

The 2024 Walton Family Foundation-Gallup survey also found that a small percentage of high schoolers have had conversations about non-college options such as apprenticeships and internships (23%), non-degree requiring careers (19%), or entrepreneurship (13%).

Weingarten stressed that there needs to be more integration between industries and schools to design programs. “You need kids to interface with industry in a real way, whether it is an internship or pre-apprenticeship program,” said Weingarten.

Supporting non-college-bound students

Career Convergence magazine suggests starting with school counselors, who can directly gauge

how many students are not college-bound. In addition, these counselors can discuss non-college options such as apprenticeship programs, technical/trade schools, military, service year programs, and gap year programs with students and parents.

Schools can arrange events for non-accredited careers, giving students a similar opportunity that they would have at college fairs and school visits. Education Week recently interviewed young people who skipped college, who revealed how their high school exposed them to non-accredited careers and supported their interests.

Another way to provide support is through a career-tech education program, which has been a bipartisan issue for years. U.S. House Rep. John Mannion, D-N.Y., has been promoting CTE programs in New York through a partnership with Micron Technology, a technology company that focuses on memory and storage solutions. This partnership allowed students interested in the semiconductor or tech industry a pathway from their high school.

“There was communication with our local manufacturers and our local higher ed institution, and there was investment by the school board,” said Mannion. “If we are going to meet the demands of the future and the workforce demands ... we need more flexibility in the school district and the programs that are pilots.” ■

For this Louisiana school district, ensuring the future readiness of students begins with community engagement

The Calcasieu Parish School Board relies on partnerships and digital resources to enhance and support career and technical education

Located in southwest Louisiana, Calcasieu Parish School Board (CPSB) is the fifth-largest school district in the state, serving roughly 30,000 students. The district has a robust Career and Technical Education (CTE) department focused on creating learning opportunities that provide students with the skills necessary for success in careers or post-secondary institutions. Many classes offer industry-based certifications or internships.

Tony McCardle is the Administrative Director of Career and Technical Education for CPSB. “We provide students with the latest technologies, resources, and equipment so that when they leave us, they have real-world professional skills,” he says.

Calcasieu Parish sits on the Louisiana coast near Texas—a region prone to devastating hurricanes. “We’re still recovering from our most recent hurricanes, Laura and Delta, from 2020,” McCardle says. “It’s a strong and resilient community. Our schools, students, and families come together and help each other to get through adversity.”

Community engagement drives CTE

McCardle says engagement with this strong local community is vital to the development of effective and relevant CTE programming. “It’s so important to listen to your stakeholders—students, parents, local businesses, and industry. We build our programs based on need and based on student interest.”

In addition to the traditional trades like welding, pipefitting, electrical, HVAC, plumbing, carpentry, automotive repair and healthcare, the district also offers a robust hospitality program, supported by a new partnership with the Louisiana Hotel and Lodging Association, among others. “The CTE field is always changing, so we’re continually looking at new pathways and content areas,” McCardle says. “Some recent additions include coding, cybersecurity, networking, and AI.”



CPSB also provides a Summer Career Academy for students to earn new course credit for CTE courses, obtain industry-based credentials, and receive a paid stipend.

Industry-aligned resources

McCardle says that digital CTE content from Cengage School has been a vital component to the district's programs. "We certainly saw the value in what Cengage School had to offer to our students," McCardle explains. "It's great supplemental material."

Cengage School's career and technical education resources empower students with real-world skills, industry-aligned content, and certification prep to confidently step into today's workforce.

Resources include career exploration content, test preparation tools, and subject-specific libraries. "For example, students taking automotive repair courses can access Chilton's manuals through Cengage's online library of content," McCardle says.

Dozens of additional Cengage resources align with the district's diverse CTE pathways, from culinary arts to IT and healthcare. "They are easy to access for both teachers and students, and they can be used anywhere—at school or at home," he says. "Cengage resources help us expand access to the technical manuals and career information that our students need."

"CTE For All"

CPSB serves students from a diverse mix of socioeconomic backgrounds. As a result, McCardle says the district emphasizes equity in its CTE programs. "We do our very best to level those playing fields and offer equal opportunities for all students. Our theme is 'CTE For All,' meaning not only that all students should have access to these programs, but that all students can benefit from taking this type of coursework."

McCardle says the district also ensures that cost is never a barrier to involvement. "We supply everything needed for every student to be successful in their CTE classes."

Measuring success beyond graduation

McCardle says success isn't just about graduation rates—it's about long-term impact. "We try to stay in contact with students after they leave us. Are they still with the company they joined? Are they working in their dream job? Those are important measures for us," he says. "The other side is important as well. So, we ask local employers if our students are good employees, if they have the knowledge and skills they need, and if they are professional."

The district utilizes business advisory boards, family engagement, and career coaches to help

track outcomes and see how former students are doing.

"We also love to engage with recent graduates who have moved on to successful careers in the fields they studied here," McCardle says. "It can be very motivating and inspiring for our students to hear from 'near peers' as opposed to teachers and administrators. It shows the students what's possible."

McCardle is passionate about challenging old stigmas when it comes to CTE. "Traditionally, a lot of people believed that if you're not going on to a four-year university, you're less successful or are going to have a less valuable career. We've been working to flip that script," he says, adding that his own sons, who are now in college, benefited from taking CTE courses in culinary arts and Adobe design in high school, earning credentials that could land them jobs in the future.

Finding and hiring qualified educators

McCardle explains that the district employs several strategies for finding and hiring experienced CTE educators. "We recruit some people from the field that are very professional in that field and ask if they would be interested in becoming teachers," he said. "Others will approach us because they are interested. Sometimes they are tired of a stressful or intense job setting like a hospital and want a change of pace."

While these professionals bring their real-world experience and technical expertise to the classroom, they typically lack formal teaching experience. To bridge that gap, the district offers a condensed teacher certification course focused on classroom management, lesson planning, and curriculum development. "We help them learn classroom management, teaching styles, and how to follow a curriculum," McCardle explains, adding that after hiring, the district provides ongoing support and professional development to ensure instructors succeed.

Focused on the future

McCardle sees the field of CTE continuing to evolve. "Coding, networking, security, and AI continue to be on the rise," he says. "We will continue to be led by student interest and by the needs of our local industries as they develop," he says.

"My advice to other districts would be to listen to the needs and interests of all your stakeholders: businesses, students, families, and your community. That's where your funding and support come from, and that's who your schools ultimately serve."



To learn more, go to
cengageschool.com/future-ready

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3 Ways Leaders Develop College and Career Pathways Designed to Serve All Students

By Sarah Schwartz

In many schools, rigorous academic coursework—Advanced Placement classes, dual-enrollment programs, or career-technical electives—is reserved for only the highest-achievers.

What does it take for a district to make those options available to the majority of the student body?

Answering that question has driven the work of Jennifer Norrell, the outgoing superintendent of East Aurora schools in Illinois, and Lazaro Lopez, the associate superintendent overseeing curriculum and instruction for the Township High School District 214 outside of Chicago.

Norrell and Lopez, both recognized as 2025 EdWeek Leaders To Learn From, discussed how they transformed their districts' approaches to college and career readiness in a May 6 panel during Education Week's Virtual Leadership Symposium.

In East Aurora, Norrell vastly expanded the district's AP program, more than doubling the percentage of high schoolers taking these courses over the past six years, while holding the pass rate steady.

Lopez led the creation of what he calls a "college-ready by design" framework in District 214 that allows students to explore and pursue career interests through coursework and work-based learning. In the 2023-24 school year, 84 percent of the district's graduating seniors earned early college credits.

"Our theory was, if the school had a purposeful place in a student's self-discovery of their future, ... and if we can design a system that revolves around that individual, then we get them to not only be at school but to be fully engaged with school," said Lopez.

He and Norrell spoke about the logistical and pedagogical challenges involved in building a college- and career-ready approach from the ground up. Read on for three takeaways for school and district leaders from the conversation.

1. Lay the groundwork for students to tackle challenging courses.

In East Aurora, leaders wanted to make sure students could handle more academically



Jamie Kelter Davis for Education Week

Jennifer Norrell, the superintendent of East Aurora School District 131, meets with district leaders for the School Leadership Team's weekly meeting to discuss a college-readiness presentation for students at East Aurora High School in Aurora, Ill. She has led efforts to expand and enrich the kinds of post-high school pathways the school offers, both in core academics and in career-technical fields.

“This requires more than just having counselors put kids in new classes. This was an entire paradigm shift for us as a district.”

DAVID ROBERTSON

Director of Human Resources,
McClellan, CA

rigorous content before they started expanding AP offerings, said Norrell.

"This requires more than just having counselors put kids in new classes," she said. "This was an entire paradigm shift for us as a district."

Norrell and her colleagues started by focusing on shoring up students' reading skills—a necessity if the high schoolers were to take courses featuring college-level texts. The district mandated additional reading classes for most students, including some who were in honors courses.

They also transformed 9th grade classes, and some 10th grade classes, into pre-AP classes, aligning the curriculum to the prerequisite knowledge and skills students would need for AP classes down the line.

Steps such as these set students up for success, Norrell said.

2. Support teachers' growth.

In offering advanced coursework, District 214 took an "all of the above" approach, said Lopez. The district has dual-credit courses, student work experiences, and a portfolio of career-related electives.

Putting these courses on the schedule required educators who were certified to teach them.

Building up staff capacity was a “slow and steady transition,” said Lopez. The district offered incentives in teacher contracts—covering more of the tuition for graduate school courses if the master’s degree a teacher was pursuing would allow them to teach one of the district’s dual-credit courses.

District leaders also formed partnerships with local institutes of higher education, negotiating a cohort rate with one university that allowed a group of teachers to earn the MBAs that would certify them to teach college-level business courses.

3. Shift school day schedules to make it easier for students to have deep academic experiences.

Both East Aurora and District 214 are on block schedules, an approach in which students are in fewer classes for longer periods of time each day.

In District 214, students can more easily leave campus during the day to complete their career-related internships, said Lopez—like the students in the district’s medical academy, who spend several hours at a hospital once a week.

A block schedule also gives teachers more space to dig into challenging texts or explore complicated topics, said Norrell. It means that students’ lunch block is longer as well, opening up a portion of that period for some kids to receive additional intervention services.

“It gives you more flexibility and more time,” said Lopez.

To listen to the full panel discussion with Norrell and Lopez, watch the event recording. ■

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How AI Is Changing Career and Technical Education

By Kevin Bushweller

Much of the focus on the use of AI in K-12 instruction has been on traditional academic subjects and whether the technology is helping or hurting students' ability to learn the subject matter.

Less attention has been paid to the role of AI in career and technical education programs. That is the case even though careers in agriculture, cooking, welding, health care, cybersecurity, and other fields are now using AI tools in a variety of ways.

But Michael Connet, the associate deputy executive director for outreach and partnerships for the Association for Career and Technical Education, is seeing rising interest in the CTE community in AI's potential to transform that landscape. And he expects the interest to continue rising.

In a recent conversation with Education Week, Connet talked about how the technology is being used to solve problems and create opportunities, why the CTE community has embraced greater use of AI tools and platforms in general, and how to guard against unintended consequences in learning environments.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

When did CTE educators start thinking more deliberately about the role of AI?

I'd say early 2023, there was significant growth. That growth has been on a steady upward curve. About a year ago, I'd [estimate] about half of CTE programs had some use, be it preliminary or more advanced. Now the challenge is how you move beyond what I call the "Googlification" of AI, where it's just used more or less as an advanced search tool.

What is an example of how CTE programs can move beyond "Googlification"?

A big problem for CTE has always been transportation to and from [school to CTE training centers]. One CTE director said they've been able to apply an AI-powered tool to look at all of the schedules from all of the



Wesley Hitt for Education Week

Students in the technology strand of Bentonville public schools' Ignite program work on a project during class in Bentonville, Ark. The program offers career-pathway training for juniors and seniors in the district, including an emphasis on learning AI skills.

sending schools and the times and availability of lab space at their center. It's come up with recommendations [in minutes] for scheduling that otherwise would have taken hours, days, maybe even weeks to complete.

Is the surge of interest in AI part of a more technology-oriented approach to CTE?

By virtue of the hands-on, experiential nature of CTE instruction, there hasn't been historically a major role for educational technology in CTE classrooms. That all changed because of the pandemic when teachers had to go remote and use the learning-management system for communication and virtual learning. Now that we're back in person fully and doing things that are hands-on, ed tech has stayed with them.

What are some examples of rising use of AI in CTE classrooms?

Culinary. You've got instructors who are using the technology to do makeshift food and nutrition analyses by taking a photo of a refrigerator with items that are in there and being able to concoct what recipes on a health level would be good for a person with specific dietary needs.

HVAC tech. That's another traditional skilled-trades area using tools that basically are designed to provide predictive analytics that help them monitor energy efficiency. Those are tools that students are now being trained on that are [used with] real products that those technicians need to deal with and helping those learners understand not just how to use [the tools], but what's the secret sauce that's contributing to the information that the AI is able to act upon.

AI often gets things wrong. How should schools teach students to be critical evaluators of the technology?

That's the opportunity for CTE. It is to continue to find ways to embed that critical thinking with those applications. You're seeing early adopters acknowledge that, and they're successfully doing it. I liken it to what I call our light switch concept. You flip the light switch on, and the lights come on without any consideration about what's happening either there at the switch level or even at the power-generating level.

Once a CTE program can dissect that so that you understand when you flip the light switch, there's a circuit relay that allows electricity to flow that's generated from trans-

mission lines. Then you have a greater understanding of the entire ecosystem.

There has always been an inherent tension in CTE around preparing students for jobs in local companies versus helping them develop skills to go where the most lucrative job opportunities exist. How is technology influencing that debate?

If I'm out in rural Idaho, I don't have to necessarily think only about programs that are going to meet the needs of my local employers. If there is a remote learning opportunity around a career and tech field that there's a need for nationally, then some of those programs can be offered, whereas before, maybe they wouldn't have been.

What about the kid who wants to stay in Idaho and work in agriculture?

A traditional farming program now needs to also talk about using drones with AI-powered sensors to teach students about soil monitoring and crop-yield optimization or sustainable farming, whereas before it was pretty perfunctory to what an individual could do physically with their hands.

Any cautionary notes about the use of AI in CTE programs?

Trust but verify. It's so new, and a lot of us don't really know what sits under the water line in that algorithm.

How do we sensitize learners to the privacy issues and the accuracy of the information? In a very overt way, don't just make it a side part of the conversation or something that's handled in one module of learning within a semesterlong course. Make sure it's woven throughout. ■

Additional Resource 
View this article's charts



Wesley Hitt for Education Week

Students in Bentonville public schools' Ignite program work on projects during class in Bentonville, Ark. The program offers career-pathway training for juniors and seniors in the district.

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How Schools' CTE Offerings Are Going High Tech

By Arianna Prothero

Technology is playing a much bigger role in school districts' career and technical education programs, a shift that experts say started during the pandemic and is continuing as the use of artificial intelligence expands across all sectors of society.

Over the past five years, the most popular category for new CTE programs in schools was for careers in digital technology, IT, AI, and cybersecurity, according to a survey of teachers, principals, and district leaders connected to career and technical education. The survey found that 28 percent of educators said their school or district had started these kinds of technology programs sometime within the past five years.

Experts say the creation of those new programs is driven largely by technological advances, such as the rapid development and adoption of AI-powered technologies, the increasing frequency and sophistication of cyberattacks, and the expanding use of digital technologies in the workplace.

In addition to new offerings in technology-related fields, other career areas where new programs have taken root over the past five years include education; arts, entertainment, and design; and construction, the survey found.

As it is, the three most commonly offered CTE pathways in schools and districts are digital technology, IT, AI, and cybersecurity; construction, including architecture and civil engineering; and hospitality, including events, tourism, and culinary arts, according to the EdWeek Research Center survey.

In addition to rising interest in tech-focused CTE programming, all career and technical education programming is becoming more technology-oriented, said Michael Connet, the associate deputy executive director for outreach and partnerships for the Association for Career and Technical Education. He spoke with Education Week recently as part of a special report on AI in CTE.

“By virtue of the hands-on, experiential nature of CTE instruction, there hasn’t been historically a major role for educational technology in CTE classrooms,” he said. “That all changed because of the pandemic when teachers had to go remote and use the learning-management system for communication and virtual learning. Now that we’re back in person fully and doing things that are hands-on, ed tech has stayed with them.” ■

Additional Resource

View this article's charts



Published December 05, 2025

Give Students Meaningful, Work-Oriented Learning, U.S. Executives Say

By Jennifer Vilcarino

Schools are making moves to provide more career and technical education courses that offer work-oriented learning experiences as student demand for those opportunities continues to rise.

A recent EdWeek Research Center survey found that 75% of teachers, principals, and district leaders said their schools or districts plan to offer more work-based learning and internship opportunities in the next five years.

But one big challenge for schools will be to establish meaningful, work-oriented learning experiences that help students develop skills that are transferable across almost any field. What should that look like? And how can schools make it happen in and outside of classrooms?

To address those types of questions, Education Week reached out to senior executives of American companies from a variety of industries. We asked them: What types of career learning experiences for K-12 students in school and actual workplaces do you think would help?

(In a related question, we asked senior executives from those companies to identify the specific skills students need to develop while they are in school to succeed later when they enter the workforce. See the responses to that question here.)

The following are the responses to the work-oriented learning experiences question. They have been edited for length and clarity.

Bryan Quick

Director of Talent Acquisition at Abbott, a global health care company

There's no replacement for hands-on learning or the chance to obtain advice, training, and knowledge from those doing the work on a daily basis, whether they're in the lab, the office, or out in the field. Offering high school students the chance to see how a company operates, what a workday looks like, and what different jobs entail can open their eyes to a wide array of careers and pathways to success. It helps them envision the future.



Internships like the ones Abbott offers also provide students with an awareness of the skills and experiences required for certain jobs. And by providing students with on-the-job experiences alongside seasoned professionals, they can obtain a greater understanding of what they'll need to succeed in the future in a much different way than they ever could in the classroom.

Brandee McHale

Head of Community Investing and Development at Citi and President of the Citi Foundation

Technical and vocational training, work-based learning, digital literacy up-skilling and financial education are all key to unlocking opportunity for younger workers. That's why Citi colleagues dedicate their time and talents year-round to providing financial education programming to K-12 students. Furthermore, through the Citi Foundation's 2025 Global Innovation Challenge, we are supporting many nonprofits in their efforts to deliver these kinds of experiences. For example, by equipping young adults from low-income communities in California and New York with AI training, professional development, and social support, one grantee is helping increase access to high-quality technology careers and economic mobility.

Another is helping youth in Puerto Rico gain access to careers in the aerospace industry by connecting them to technical trainings and employers, as well as providing job placement assistance, mentorship, and access to continued education. With hands-on experiences like these, combined with access to trainings, networks, and mentors, I am confident that we can help close skills gaps and support resilient economic futures for the next generation.

Laura Slover

Managing Director of Skills for the Future at ETS, a global education and talent solutions organization

To close the growing gap in workplace readiness, we need to rethink high school offerings. Experiences that center around solving real-world problems encourage students to ask, "What is the problem and what do I need to know to solve it?" That mindset builds curiosity, technical knowledge, critical thinking, and adaptability. Community-based learning and apprenticeships also give students direct exposure to professional environments, while innovative programs like Big Picture Learning and High Tech High show how personalized, project-driven education can foster collaboration and resilience. And equally importantly, we need to create space for failure. Learning

happens when things don't go as planned—that's where creativity, grit, and growth truly emerge. Shifting assessment approaches in K-12 and using tools like the Mastery Transcript provide students the opportunity to reflect on their own learning and build bodies of evidence about their capabilities. One of the most critical skills for the future will be the ability to keep adapting and developing over the course of one's life. Learning is a journey.

Melonia da Gama

Director of Training Programs at Fortinet, a cybersecurity company

For students in high school, introducing technical courses and fundamental certifications is beneficial to prepare for post-secondary education programs and higher-level technical certifications to supplement degrees and diplomas. Additionally, it is essential for students to develop personal competencies and workplace-readiness skills to be fully prepared for a career as a cybersecurity professional. These competencies—such as collaboration, critical thinking, and communication—can start being developed at an early age and grow into essential tools in the workplace.

That is what we need right now: more interest in a career within cybersecurity. Research shows that the global cyber workforce is short by more than 4.7 million professionals. Providing students with hands-on experience in “capture the flag” cybersecurity competitions, internships, training sessions with seasoned professionals, certification programs, and age-appropriate resources are important tactics to drive more interest in the field. Coordinating guest lecturers or arranging field trips to local technology companies or cybersecurity training facilities could help drive interest in the industry and ultimately prepare interested students for rewarding careers in cybersecurity or information technology.

Maureen Heymans

Vice President of Learning and General Manager for LearnX at Google

To help prepare young students for the future world of work, we need to design active learning experiences. This means moving away from the arm's length approach of shadowing someone toward hands-on experiences that can teach K-12 students how to solve problems, interact more effectively with technology like AI, and build something from scratch.

Here are three types of learning experiences that can help:

Vibecoding [a practice that uses natural language to prompt AI]: Students take a passion project and turn it into something tangible. Think football, gaming, or baking, where instead of a blank canvas, they could vibe-code interactive versions to create a fitness tracker, a retro version of a game, or a recipe app. This helps them build knowledge of AI technologies, [and understand] their strengths and weaknesses.

Structured AI Co-Creation and Critique Sprints: These sprints could tackle real-world problems and teach AI literacy skills. First, brainstorm alone without AI. Then use AI like Gemini to expand and refine those ideas. The most crucial step is critically evaluating the AI's output, identifying any biases or ethical blind spots. This teaches students to treat AI as a brainstorming partner and not a replacement for original thought.

The Notebook LM Research & Synthesis Challenge: Give a team a messy folder of conflicting reports and data. Their mission [is to] use a tool like NotebookLM to make sense of the chaos. They must find the contradictions, synthesize key arguments, and propose a path forward. This simulates the high-level research and critical thinking required in a job like engineering and moves them from passive consumers to active explorers, helping them manage cognitive load and manage multiple perspectives—a vital skill in today's workplace.

Lydia Logan

Vice President of Education and Workforce Development at IBM

Closing these gaps requires connecting learning with real-world experience. Education and industry must collaborate to give students early, authentic exposure to workplaces and emerging fields.

By equipping educators and community partners to guide students toward in-demand skills—and fostering partnerships across business, higher education, and workforce systems—we can build a more resilient, future-ready talent pipeline.

Dave Zasada

Vice President of Education and Corporate Responsibility at Intuit, a global financial technology platform

Since launching in 2023, nearly 4 million students across the United States have in-

teracted with Intuit for Education's free financial literacy curriculum. Over the course of that time, we've seen the importance of combining real-life training with virtual and classroom-based learning, and have launched several initiatives to help fill those gaps and meet students where they are, including the Intuit for Education Food Truck Program.

The Food Truck Program equips underserved and underrepresented Career and Technical Education (CTE) high school students with everything they need to run their own food truck—from financial and business management tools to culinary training and startup grants. Throughout the program, students learn everything from entrepreneurial finance and point-of-sale systems to designing a menu and sourcing food locally and seasonally. This free, work-based technical and entrepreneurial program provides school districts with fully operational food trucks, equipped with commercial-grade kitchens, and a curriculum to teach high school students how to operate a business using Intuit's financial tools, like an internship on wheels. The program has now had close to 10,000 students participate, and is currently active at schools in Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, Nashville, Nevada, San Diego, and other places.

By combining classroom learning with true on-the-job experience, we can transform financial literacy from a passive learning experience into an active, engaging journey that immerses students in real-world simulations that mirror everyday financial decisions. That way, students don't just learn about personal finance; they practice it and bring those lessons with them into the real world.

Duwain Pinder

Partner at McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm

Our research suggests a link between Career and Technical Education (CTE) and performance. High school students who take CTE courses have higher graduation rates and greater employability, especially students from low-income backgrounds, than those who do not. To accomplish this, we see an opportunity for industries and schools to collaborate more closely to reimagine career-connected learning and adopt evidence-based models to design more effective programs. Youth apprenticeships and dual-enrollment programs also offer students an opportunity to gain hands-on experience outside of traditional learning models, enabling a more rounded education and a broader resume of experiences.

Deirdre Quarnstrom*Vice President of Education at Microsoft*

Real-world experience is essential. Integrating AI into the classroom with guidance from educators is helping provide students with digital and creative problem-solving skills that will help them thrive in future careers.

But it starts with building strong fundamentals and providing access to age-appropriate experiences. For example, Reading Coach, part of Microsoft's Learning Accelerators, helps students strengthen literacy and reading skills through personalized practice and feedback. These tools—along with others focused on math and critical thinking—create a foundation for more advanced technologies and ensure students are confident learners. We also see enthusiasm for AI literacy in Minecraft Education and Hour of AI, where learners of all ages explore how AI works, practice digital literacy, and reflect on safe and responsible use through hands-on activities.

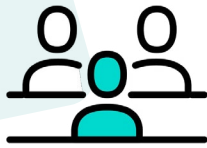
That kind of early exposure is very beneficial. When students can experiment with the same AI tools in the classroom that professionals use in the workplace, they start building both technical understanding and confidence.

In short, if we give K-12 students opportunities to use AI responsibly in school, we're essentially giving them a head start on skills that today's workplaces demand. It's about turning classroom experiences into a springboard for the next generation of creators, inventors, and leaders. ■



From Classroom to Career: **Real-World Readiness** Starts Here

Digital supplemental solutions that put college
and career success within every student's reach



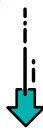
83%

of high school students
feel prepared for their
post-graduation plans
but would like to have
been taught more general
life skills.* College and
Career Readiness (CCR)
leaders can help close
the gap with relevant,
future-focused learning.

CCR solutions from
Cengage School deliver
flexible, digital-first
resources that connect
classroom learning to real-
world careers — equipping
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thrive beyond graduation.

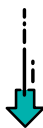
Source: Cengage Group, 2025

1 The Challenge



- **Limited** instructional time and varying student skill levels
- **Equity** gaps for first-generation and underserved learners
- **Accountability** pressures to meet CCR and CTE standards
- **Teacher** support and scalable professional learning needs

2 The Solution



**College & Career Readiness: Supplemental Enrichment
Solutions for High Schools** — powered by a trusted
portfolio of learning resources.

Benefits

- **LMS and SSO friendly:** Canvas, Schoology, Blackboard, Moodle, ClassLink
- **Built-in analytics** and progress tracking
- **Standards-aligned:** NGSS, Common Core (chemistry), Perkins V (CTE), CCR benchmarks
- **Accessibility:** Translation, font adjustments, audio, multimodal learning

Learn about **supplemental resources from Cengage School.**



3 Supplemental Resources From Cengage School

College and Career Readiness



Gale Presents: Peterson's Test & Career Prep

- **Exam prep** (AP, ACT, CLEP, DSST, SAT) and vocational certifications
- **College planning** (4,200+ accredited schools), scholarships and financial aid tools
- **Career exploration**, personalized assessments, résumé and cover letter builders, personal websites, job listings

Outcome: Equitable access and future-ready learning for every student

Allied Health & Science



Visible Body (Interactive 3D Anatomy)

- **Dissectible 3D models**, animations, AR and simulations
- **LMS & gradebook** integration
- **Support** across health sciences, A&P, nursing, medical assisting, dental, sports medicine and more

Outcome: Deep anatomical understanding for certification-ready learners

Gale Health & Wellness

- **Full-text medical journals**, Gale encyclopedias and millions of updated articles
- **Accessibility** (60+ languages, adjustable fonts, OpenDyslexic, audio)

Outcome: Health literacy, critical thinking and workforce-ready research skills

Gale Interactive: Human Anatomy/ Science/Chemistry

- **Immersive 3D models**, virtual labs, NGSS-aligned sessions and self-quizzing
- **Biology, chemistry, earth science** and anatomy in one web-based experience

Outcome: Hands-on STEM learning that builds technical knowledge and problem-solving



Business, Entrepreneurship and Marketing

MJ Apparel (Virtual Retail Simulation)

- **91 real-world scenarios** in marketing, pricing, inventory, finance and human resources

Outcome: Decision-making, data literacy and employability

Gale Business: Plan Builder

- **Lean Canvas**, SWOT, Porter's Five Forces, break-even analysis, financial projections
- **Pitch deck creation**, full business plans, SCORE mentor integration

Outcome: Actionable business plans aligned to industry expectations

CTE Skilled Trades



ChiltonLibrary (Automotive Repair)

- **Step-by-step** OEM procedures, VIN decoder, videos, ASE prep
- **Coverage** for 18,000+ vehicles

Outcome: Confidence and safety in repair practices aligned to ASE standards

Employability Skills



MindTap for Soft Skills

- **Professionalism, teamwork, leadership**, communication, critical thinking and career development
- **Ready-to-use, customizable courses**, analytics and LMS integration

Outcome: Interpersonal and professional habits employers value most



Math for CTE

Math Resources for CTE Pathways

- **Real-world math** for healthcare, trades, automotive and business (dosages, repair estimates, payroll, loans, taxes)
- **Financial literacy** and consumer awareness; technology workshops

Outcome: Numeracy that transfers directly to workplace success



Professional Learning for Teachers

Gale eBooks: Professional Learning

- **Unlimited access**, permanent ownership, cross-searchable chapters
- **Trusted publishers** (ISTE, ASCD, NSTA, Corwin, Solution Tree, ConnectEDD)
- **Classroom management**, AI/digital literacy, CTE leadership and program design

Outcome: District-wide, equitable PD that accelerates CCR aligned instruction



Tomball ISD Superintendent Dr. Martha Salazar-Zamora, center left, walks with colleagues in Tomball, Texas.

Published February 09, 2026

A Superintendent's Vision Turned An Oil Site Into a Career Launchpad

By Arianna Prothero

Tomball, Texas—

Superintendent Martha Salazar-Zamora's unlikely vision for a career and technical education utopia here emerged back in 2021, as she toured the site of a bankrupt oil field-services company.

A wall of windows in the former executive conference room and a private patio yielded a perfect view of the company's one-time fiefdom: 70 acres and 11 buildings.

Karla Sandoval, the Tomball Independent School District's head of career and technical education, who joined her boss and a real estate agent on the visit, recalled Salazar-Zamora explaining her plan to buy the property, and move some personnel into its deserted office buildings.

Then the superintendent gestured to a sea of abandoned warehouses and outbuildings.

"That is CTE," Sandoval recalled Salazar-Zamora saying to her. "Are you ready for the challenge?"

Sandoval laughed as she replayed the exchange more than four years later.

"I was like 'yes,'" she said. "And in my head, I'm going, 'Oh my gosh, I hope I can deliver.'"

And deliver, Salazar-Zamora and her team have done.

From warehouses to classrooms

On an early December day this school year, inside a warehouse building converted into classrooms, graphic design students in the fabrication lab press "Hope Squad" decals onto shirts for a districtwide mental health initiative.

In another classroom, students in the aviation program practice takeoffs and landings on desktop plane simulators.

Inside former office buildings, students in the legal-studies pathway enact a mock trial in a room refurbished as a courtroom. A couple of doors down, students in the district's law-enforcement pathway practice pulling over a driver in a 360-degree virtual simulation.

On the back of the property in what was once a shell of a building without walls, now stands a 45,000-square-foot agricultural arena that hosts robotics competitions and livestock shows.

This is how a handful of the district's 28 career pathways make use of a property that many would have written off as a sad casualty of the pandemic four years ago.

"Purchasing the oil and gas company site, which is now the Tomball Innovation Center, it was a dream in my head that grew and grew and grew," said Salazar-Zamora, known informally in this district of more than 23,000 students as Dr. Z.

That purchase has been instrumental in the expansion of Tomball's CTE program.

CTE enrollment has risen from 6,520 students in the 2019-20 school year to 9,415 this year, fueled in part by rising enrollment districtwide.

Last year, Tomball students earned a total of 1,250 industry-based certifications, up from 572 in the 2020-21 school year. The number of students participating in work-based learning has nearly tripled since the 2020-21 school year, to 318 this year.

The district has added two CTE coordinators, one of whom is dedicated to agriculture, two CTE counselors, and a CTE work-based learning specialist since the 2020-21 school year. That brought Tomball's total team of CTE educators to 115 teachers and administrators.

Salazar-Zamora is the type of leader higher-flyers are drawn to work for

Originally, Tomball and the company that once owned the property, BJ Services, planned to create an academy of energy and international business. But then the pandemic hit, delivering an economic blow that BJ Services couldn't survive and scuttling the district's hopes for the specialized academy.

From the ashes of that plan rose another, when Salazar-Zamora happened to drive by the empty building one day and see a for sale sign. Tomball bought the land for \$39.5 million in 2021, a fraction of the \$115 million the property was valued at, according to district officials.

The site now houses district administrative offices, CTE classrooms, and Tomball Star Academy, the district's early-college high school. Because the site was bought in bankruptcy, the district got everything on the property, from coffee cups to large, built-in cranes.

Michael Pratt, a member of the district's board of trustees, recalled his first reaction to Salazar-Zamora's pitch to purchase the oil company's property: "OK, that's big. It's a great deal, but tell me the vision."

Salazar-Zamora had a strong track record when it came to delivering on her plans, Pratt said. Both she and several board members—including Pratt—had relatively long tenures in their positions in the district, which had

Danielle Villasana for Education Week

allowed them to forge a trusting relationship and shared vision for CTE, he said.

Pratt knew Salazar-Zamora could leverage the property to meet her vision in large part because she has always been a magnet for talent.

“She leads with her heart. Somebody who handles her business and leads with her heart is rare,” Pratt said. That’s typically the type of person hard-working and visionary people are drawn to work for, he added.

On a recent December morning, Salazar-Zamora stood inside a cavernous warehouse on the Tomball Innovation Center site, surveying the space that holds a crane and two small, gutted planes propped up on wood pallets and jacks.

She was dressed in a festive red skirt with matching purse, necklace, and Christmas bauble earrings. Her high-heeled, snake-skin boots—also bright red—lent a few additional inches to her five foot, nine inch frame. The outfit made her both imposing and cheery, a pairing of traits that likely helps Salazar-Zamora get a lot of what she wants for her district.

With a sweep of her hand, Salazar-Zamora described how the hanger would soon be filled with students working on planes as part of the district’s new aviation-maintenance program.

Not everyone in the community has been thrilled with the district’s plans for the purchase. Some parents questioned whether the old industrial site was safe for students, according to local news stories at the time. The district worked with environmental experts to ensure the site’s safety.

Tomball ISD could not have afforded the purchase if it hadn’t been for the bankruptcy sale, Salazar-Zamora conceded. Which is why she was so keen to jump at the rare opportunity.

“There are moments in a career when you know in your heart this is right,” Salazar-Zamora said. “I call this a legacy purchase.”

The move exemplifies her approach to leadership. She thinks big, colleagues say, and she doesn’t take no for an answer.

Salazar-Zamora’s leadership was shaped by childhood challenges

Those are attributes forged during Salazar-Zamora’s childhood as she navigated the world as a child with profound hearing loss. Her mother insisted she never let her disability stop her.

“I was raised with a very simple mantra, and that was to never let my disability be an inability,” said Salazar-Zamora, who had an operation at age 17 to repair her hearing.

Her mother “reminded me [of that] when I thought something was too hard. When I didn’t think I could be in band,” said Salazar-Zamora, 59. “And then I fought hard and made it into the band.”

Salazar-Zamora went on to start her education career as a teacher and speech and language pathologist.

Her upbringing also influenced her focus on CTE. Salazar-Zamora was raised in a poor, rural community, she said, where trade skills were as much a pathway to the American dream as a college degree. Since then, three decades in education has crystalized Salazar-Zamora’s belief that CTE is necessary to help every child to find a sense of belonging and motivation.

It was that belief that led Salazar-Zamora to invest so heavily in Tomball’s CTE facilities, after being promoted from the district’s chief academic officer to its superintendent in 2017.

Top-notch facilities can help recruit top-notch CTE teachers

The land purchase has helped Tomball tackle some of the biggest challenges facing CTE programs nationwide.

According to an October EdWeek Research Center survey of educators whose jobs are connected to CTE, a lack of facilities, funding, and teachers are among the most-cited factors holding their programs back.

“I hear principals and district administrators say over and over again that ‘we would love to offer this program. We just don’t have the space,’” said Walter Ecton, an assistant professor at the Center for the Study of Higher and Post-Secondary Education at the University of Michigan.

And when it comes to hiring teachers, schools end up in an often unwinnable competition with the private sector. Many of the industries that fall under the CTE umbrella pay their employees more than public schools can, Ecton said.

(Ecton spoke with Education Week as a general expert on CTE—he is not familiar with Tomball ISD’s program specifically.)

Even after successfully hiring teachers, districts struggle to retain them, said Mark Boshier, the senior director of technical assistance and training for the Career and Technical Association of Texas.

Teachers coming straight from industry face a steep learning curve in mastering the instructional side of the job.

Tomball ISD’s investments in professional development for its CTE teachers have been

important to retention and program growth, said Boshier whose organization has recognized the district for its CTE work.

“Too many times we hire teachers and tell them, here’s your chalk, I’ll see you in December,” Boshier said. “That’s not what Tomball ISD does. They are constantly training their [teachers] and helping them to grow as professionals. That leadership comes from the top. A superintendent has to be invested in that or it doesn’t happen.”

The Tomball Innovation Center itself is also a powerful draw for new teachers, said Lee Wright, the assistant superintendent of human talent for the district.

“Nobody else has the headquarters of a former oil company,” said Wright. “Just having this site, we can recruit—and not just recruit but retain.”

That was certainly the case with aviation instructor Justin Morrison, who started teaching at the district three years ago.

Shortly before winter break, Morrison watched over a pair of students’ shoulders as they practiced landing in a large flight simulator that looks like a futuristic stagecoach. The contraption, manufactured by Redbird Flight Simulators—an industry leader—is made up of a white metal box, its interior is outfitted with two seats, an instrument panel, and several screens positioned to look like cockpit windows. Its body rests on a red metal base that mimics the movements of a plane.

The screens showed mountain peaks in the distance poking out of cloud tops as the students—one acting as a pilot and the other as the co-pilot—descended into the clouds, losing all visibility. With a beeping sound, the red base shook, simulating light turbulence.

Eventually, a runway lined with lights materialized on the screen. “You just have to work on the outer line ...” Morrison said as the plane touched down, “and staying on the runway,” he added, as the students veered off it into the grass.

“And that’s why we have simulators,” Morrison concluded.

Morrison moved from Oklahoma, and he said he turned down other job offers to take the position in Tomball.

Tomball, he said, “really wanted to invest in this program, whereas other districts didn’t have that same vision, didn’t seem like they had that passion for growing this aviation pathway. And that drew me in immediately.”

Tomball is located in a rapidly expanding community outside Houston, near two major commercial airports and several smaller ones, so there is a demand for pilots and mechan-

ics, said Salazar-Zamora. She meets quarterly with community leaders, including the mayor, the city manager, and the local chamber of commerce to keep a finger on the pulse of the area's employment needs.

It's important for CTE programs to offer pathways that have clear connections to careers after high school, said the University of Michigan's Ecton. High-quality programs also have strong relationships with local industry and employers, he said, and evolve to stay aligned with workforce needs as the economy changes.

CTE facilities can double as a revenue source for cash-strapped districts

While research on the long-term benefits of CTE programs on students' future earnings is still emerging, CTE programs can help keep students engaged in their schooling, Ecton said.

"Students do better when they know what outcome they're working toward," he said. "I think especially for students who are struggling to figure out where they see themselves in the future, CTE can be really useful."

For Kaighly Davis, a junior in Tomball ISD, enrolling in the legal-studies pathway has eased her stress over her postsecondary plans.

The future beyond high school can be overwhelming. Getting to experiment and learn about potential careers in high school makes her next step feel less inscrutable, she said.

"In this program, you're able to figure out if this is really what you want to do for the rest of your life, because that's something that's very scary for high schoolers," said Kaighly, who plans to become a lawyer.

The Tomball Innovation Center has also become a source of income for the district. The district rents out the agriculture arena and the former executive conference room for events.

Law-enforcement agencies have paid to train with the district's virtual simulators used by students in that pathway. And an energy-technology company, Backer Hughes, now leases office space in one of the buildings, which generates around \$1.3 million a year for Tomball ISD.

The district still relies on federal dollars from the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education grant program and its own general fund to support CTE, but those additional dollars help.

Salazar-Zamora acknowledges that most districts won't have the opportunity to purchase an oil-services company property in bankruptcy.

But she doesn't see that as the takeaway here.

Instead, Salazar-Zamora urges district leaders in these tight budgetary times to think like entrepreneurs.

Invest in your students, your people, and your community relationships, and the work will pay dividends, Salazar-Zamora said.

"We want for every child to find a place to belong, a passion to pursue, and a love for learning that serves them well beyond the years they are with us," she said. "No superintendent could ever accomplish this kind of work without an incredible team. And my school board has been supportive of any and every crazy idea I've ever come up with, which yes, did include, 'I really think we need to buy an oil and gas company.'" ■



Jaclyn Borowski/Education Week

California Area Elementary School teacher Heather Nicholson talks with student Shyanne Schaefer during an art lesson as part of a competency-based learning program in Coal Center, Pa. The district designed the program, which eschews conventions like traditional lesson plans, letter grades, and age-specific classrooms, with a grant from Remake Learning, an organization that encourages schools and community organizations to innovate and design new learning opportunities. A new national commission will explore how to encourage such "learning ecosystems" in other communities.

Published March 05, 2026

A New National Effort Aims to Spread Learning Beyond School Walls

By Evie Blad

It takes a village to prepare students for a changing workforce, build civic engagement, and help educators solve big problems.

That's the driving idea behind learning ecosystems, place-based strategies that encourage collaboration between schools, employers, and community organizations like libraries, universities, and museums. The aim: to extend students' learning beyond school walls and give educators an opportunity to work with professionals in other sectors to rethink what happens within their buildings.

A new National Commission on Learning Ecosystems hopes to identify what works in these partnerships—which are typically fostered by nonprofit organizations that serve as intermediaries—and develop recommendations to help communities encourage collaboration in sustainable and meaningful ways. The commission, announced in February and led by the think tank New America, will bring

together educators and supporters of 12 existing ecosystems around the country.

"We've learned so much from the science of learning and development about what kind of environments students really need to participate in their education in an active way, get excited about the challenges ahead of them, and dig in and solve problems," said Lisa Guernsey, New America's senior director of birth-to-12th-grade education policy.

"It's really about recognizing how many assets are already on the ground in neighborhoods and communities," she said.

Helping schools engage with their communities

Supporters of the model frequently cite Remake Learning, a Pittsburgh-based collaborative of 1,000 organizations—including school districts, libraries, museums, universities, businesses, artists, after-school programs, and tech professionals—that launched in 2007 and has since inspired the development of

more than 40 similar ecosystems around the world.

Conversations that led to the organization's creation came after the release of the iPhone, when education, business, and community leaders in Pittsburgh saw the potential and pitfalls technology might present for students.

"It was a period of rapid change in the world around us as people were navigating this new technology and what it meant for teaching and learning," said Tyler Samstag, Remake Learning's executive director. "We wanted to leverage our community to help young people become creators, rather than just consumers."

Remake Learning regularly convenes members to brainstorm opportunities for collaboration and solutions. It also organizes task forces around target areas like personalized learning and civics education and offers rounds of "moonshot grants" to allow members to pilot big ideas.

Changing how students learn

The strategy has yielded results.

In 2021, the 900-student California Area school district in Coal Center, Pa., used a \$70,000 moonshot grant to develop an optional, experimental competency-based learning program for K-12 students that eschews conventions like traditional lesson plans, letter grades, and age-specific classrooms, a project later covered by Education Week.

The program, also known as Moonshot, tailors personalized learning plans around students' academic goals and individual interests—everything from K-pop to African foods. Students can opt to use the competency-based approach instead of a typical class for a range of subjects, including social studies, science, computer science, and art. They can opt in for every possible subject or pick just one or two and they can move back to conventional classes after a quarter if they aren't comfortable with the approach.

Another member of the network, the Northgate school district in Pittsburgh, worked with a regional health care provider to transform an abandoned hospital, allowing small businesses to lease space while providing on-site internships and hands-on STEM projects for students.

"It's the manifestation of what happens when organizations are in the same spaces, dreaming together, and finding ways to work together," Samstag said.

At the Seneca Valley school district north of Pittsburgh, leaders worked with the Chil-

dren's Museum of Pittsburgh to design a new elementary school building with engaging, interactive design elements often used in museums. The building has features like movable walls, flexible learning spaces in hallways, and plenty of natural light.

Other schools in the area have paired students with entrepreneur mentors and challenged them to design startup organizations to solve the world's problems; partnered with universities to expand teacher pipelines; worked with scientists to engage parents in STEM lessons for students; and developed high school transcripts that include relevant out-of-school activities like volunteering.

Exploring what makes learning ecosystems work

The new national commission will explore what makes such collaboration strategies work and how to ensure they are more than just a "flash in the pan," Guernsey said.

Helping schools draw on community assets may also give them resources to engage students at a time when budgets are tight and federal funding is uncertain, she said, and bringing organizations together can also help bridge ideological divides in communities.

In its first year, the commission will explore strategies used by its members in rural, urban, and suburban communities to identify what makes them successful, including how intermediary organizations are created and structured.

In its second year, the commission will develop recommendations. Those might include suggestions for state and federal policymakers to encourage place-based collaboration and ideas for measuring success, Guernsey said.

"We are very aware that this is going to look a little different in every place, but there still will need to be infrastructure that allows these connections to happen," she said. ■

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6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100
Bethesda, MD, 20814
Phone: (301) 280-3100
www.edweek.org