# The Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative's Guide to Supporting Regional Alliances around Career Pathways

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# Acknowledgments

# About this Guide

This guide was developed through a partnership between the Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative (Collaborative) and the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab at the University of Denver. The guide provides an organizing framework for the four major stages of the Collaborative's work: establishing a well-functioning and sustainable nonprofit that then provides effective backbone support to facilitate robust regional career pathway opportunities in rural areas; identifying, designing, and launching new career pathways; and meeting the long-term needs and interests of students and the local economy by effectively administering regional career pathways.

The primary aim of this guide is to provide a primer on the Collaborative's approach for reference by current and future nonprofit staff and current and future school district, higher education, and industry partners. A secondary aim is to document the Collaborative's novel approach to supporting regional alliances around career pathways for adoption in other areas of the state, for policymakers considering ways to support the expansion of career pathways—especially in rural areas—and for funders interested in supporting this and similar efforts.

We begin with an overview of career pathways in Colorado (the "what"). Next, we provide a brief overview of the literature and rationale for the Collaborative (the "why"). In the remaining sections, we describe the Collaborative's approach as broken into the four major stages described above (the "how"). In the last section, we describe the Collaborative's next steps measuring implementation and outcomes.

# Career Pathways in Colorado

Three out of four jobs in Colorado require education or training beyond high school.[1] Research shows that hands-on, career-connected learning can increase academic achievement and prepare young people for success after high school. As part of career-connected learning in K-12 education, career pathways allow students to explore, prepare, and gain experience in an area of study that supports their future career success.[2] Though definitions of career pathways vary, a career pathway program is typically defined as one which offers a clear sequence of stackable credits and credentials across secondary and postsecondary education, combined with support services, which enables K-12 students to secure industry-relevant skills, certifications and credentials, and advance to higher levels of education and employment in high-demand occupations.[3] Within these components, career pathways may include Career and Technical Education coursework, concurrent enrollment opportunities in partnership with institutions of higher education, work-based learning opportunities like job shadows, internships, and apprenticeships, and career exploration activities, including job site visits, guest speakers, and summer programs. Ultimately, career pathways and work-based learning aim to build academic knowledge in subject-matter areas (e.g., English, math, science), technical skills needed for specific occupations or careers (e.g., carpentry, cooking and baking, automotive technology), and employability skills necessary for success in any occupation (e.g., interpersonal skills, communication skills, critical thinking).[4]

> **College and career pathways** include a combination of high-quality education and training that prepare an individual to be successful in any of a full range of postsecondary options, including higher education, entering the workforce, or apprenticeships. College and career pathways are organized to meet the needs of the individual and help them enter or advance within a specific occupation or occupational cluster.

Career pathways give students the opportunity to explore career opportunities, learn more about what sparks their interests, and fit their unique talents and learning style to a course of study. They also provide young people with the opportunity to build professional relationships and develop skills needed for the workforce today and into the future.[5] Research shows that students who participate in work-based learning and career-focused education programs have higher standardized testing scores,[6] higher grade point averages,[7] higher probability of graduating from high school on time,[8] and a higher rate of high school graduation compared to all students in Colorado.[9] Career pathways exist to increase the chances that students ultimately end up in careers that are well-paying and aligned to their long-term interests and aptitude. Additionally, by gaining exposure to different career pathways in K-12, students gain a greater understanding of the different options they can pursue if their interests change.

# The Need and the Response

In recent years, increasing national attention has been directed towards supporting career pathways. Colorado has implemented a national blueprint of career pathways[10] through investments in public-private partnerships (among school districts, institutes of higher education, and industry partners) targeting key industries that are vital to regional economies.[11] This focus on cross-sector partnerships remains a high priority area for funding and evidence-building in the state. Yet, the sustainability of these partnerships is vulnerable without institutionalized systems of support[12] to provide continuity in the face of staff turnover and to strategically leverage shared resources as the number of partners increases.
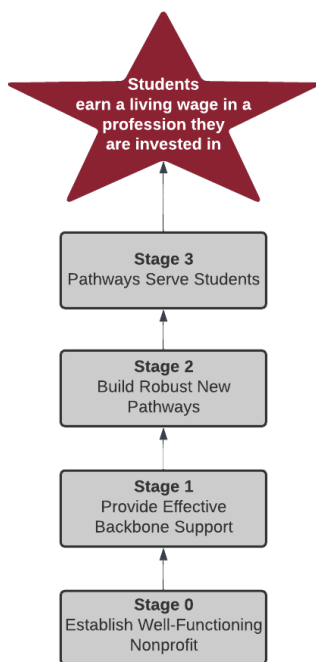


The Collaborative started as a group of leaders from five local school districts and two institutions of higher education who collaborated with nonprofit and philanthropic support partners to develop a strategy to strengthen career pathways in rural communities. With funding from a $3.6 million Response, Innovation, and Student Equity (RISE) Education Fund grant, these leaders then launched a new nonprofit, The Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative, with the mission to "strengthen diverse communities by providing pathways in career readiness and higher education for students to build 21st-century skills and economically viable futures."[13] The nonprofit facilitates sharing resources, building partnerships with industry leaders, and designing career pathways for rural students across the Collaborative's partners. With the support of the nonprofit, the Collaborative is well-positioned to build and sustain trusting relationships across sectors and equalize the balance of power among school districts of varying sizes. As such, the Collaborative is a sustainable model where districts and higher education institutions share resources to leverage all available assets in rural areas. It also supports the prioritization of student voices—especially those furthest from opportunity—regardless of which district they attend.

The Collaborative approaches career pathways from a systematic perspective that considers the needs and contributions of all players, minimizing partner burden while maximizing the Collaborative's value add. From the Collaborative's perspective, "career pathways" include college *and* career pathways, with the assumption that college serves as a stepping stone on the way to career. Consistent with this approach, the "North Star" goal is that students earn a living wage in a profession they are invested in.

This goal is made possible when the Collaborative and its nonprofit are well-functioning support partners in building and sustaining pathways that serve students effectively.

School districts benefit from robust pathway offerings and work-based learning opportunities that facilitate student exploration of career opportunities and associated pathways starting in middle school. Higher education benefits from students building an academic identity from participating in concurrent and dual enrollment courses that will strengthen future enrollment and retention. Industry partners also benefit from the centralized support of career pathways across the region. Rather than working with individual districts, industry partners have a single point of contact within the Collaborative that ensures pathways are relevant to the needs of industry and positioned to enhance the regional economy.

# Stages 0 and 1: A Nonprofit to Support the Collaborative

The Collaborative is fundamentally a network of educators who share the goal of providing students with opportunities to connect their learning to meaningful career opportunities. Such networks are inherently vulnerable to turnover among members as well as to the uncertainty of funding to sustain the work. The Collaborative launched a nonprofit to address these concerns, providing continuity via a central hub that facilitates efficient and effective provision of regionally-aligned career pathways. The nonprofit staff are responsible for the design, implementation, and fostering of shared resources *with* instead of *for* the communities served in Southwest Colorado.

Stage 0 describes how the nonprofit's Executive Director, with the support of the Board of Directors and external support partners financed through RISE, laid the foundation for a healthy, functioning nonprofit that is financially stable with a strong governance structure. Financial stability depends on blending and braiding funding from a diverse array of sources including membership fees (prorated by district size) and grants. A Board of Directors provides oversight and consists of superintendents from a subset of partner school districts, representatives from local tribal agencies, and higher education and industry partners.
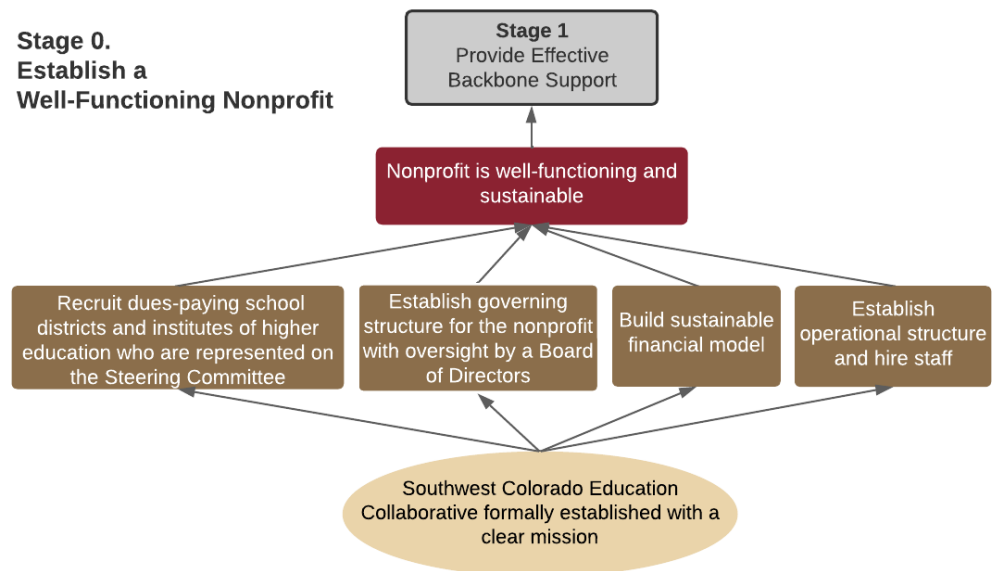


Relationships are central to the Collaborative's work, so the success of the nonprofit depends on creating a trusting learning environment among the small staff who manage specific pathways and serve as the connection between work-based learning opportunities and industry partners. A well-functioning nonprofit prioritizes this culture in all staffing decisions and provides opportunities for staff to grow in leadership and skills through professional development in areas like work-based learning and diversity and inclusion.

Stage 1 illustrates the nonprofit staff's role in ensuring that the Collaborative itself is well-functioning, sustainable, and operating in alignment with its mission by providing and evolving effective facilitation and structures to the region as a foundation for developing career pathways. The Steering Committee is comprised of leadership from partner school districts and institutions of higher education. The nonprofit staff facilitate regular meetings of the Steering Committee to address operational decisions using agreed-upon norms of engagement and processes that foster a positive culture among members. As facilitator, the nonprofit staff elevate the who (making sure the right people are in the room to make decisions about new and existing pathways), the what (key questions to make new decisions), and the how (ensuring members adhere to their expectations of collaboration to answer key questions).

When there are substantial one-time decisions to be made, like starting a pathway in a new subject area, Collaborative staff convene broader groups of stakeholders to support the decision-making processes of the Steering Committee. In addition, the Executive Director of the nonprofit stays in regular communication with individual Steering Committee members to support them in addressing the unique political and logistical organizational challenges they face behind the scenes. This relationship- and trust-building work is essential to minimizing miscommunication among members who are each responsible to their own constituencies.
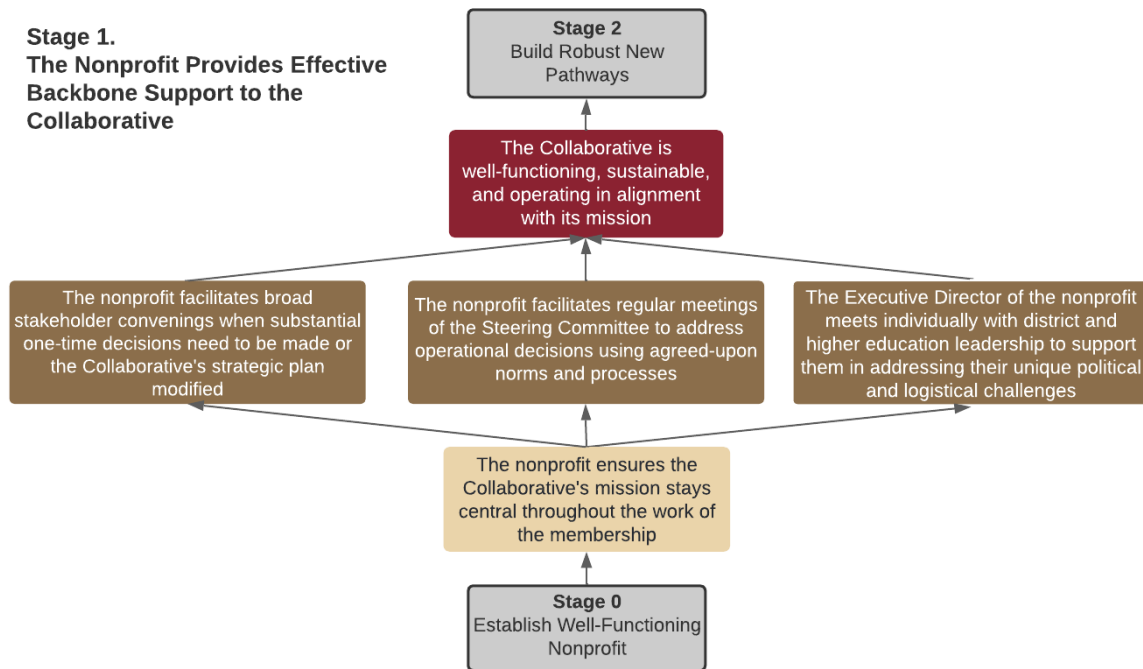
# Stage 2: Build Robust Pathways

Stage 2 provides a framework to identify and operationalize new pathways. It includes key considerations from deciding on the new pathway subject area, to describing the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved in the design of new pathways, to supporting teachers and counselors in advising and recruiting students into pathways.

The nonprofit staff first engage stakeholders from K-12 and higher education when determining which pathway to add. The following six criteria serve as a guide for selecting a new pathway:

- **Career trajectory**: What will the career trajectory look like of a student who completes this pathway?

- **Student interest**: Are students in the region interested in this pathway?

- **Workforce demand**: What will employment prospects look like in the region for a student who has completed this pathway?

- **District and higher education capacity and cost of implementation:** What resources are needed to implement this pathway? What are the costs of moving from current implementation capacity to target capacity?

- **Timeline and ease of implementation**: How long would it take to roll out this pathway? How difficult would it be to support this pathway now and in the future?

- **Regional needs and assets**: What shared assets exist among partners to serve this pathway? What would still be needed?

These criteria are not ordered and are not necessarily weighted equally—stakeholders collectively consider all these factors simultaneously. For example, a new pathway may have a lot of student interest and high demand in the workforce but may be difficult to implement. Stakeholders may still recommend that the Steering Committee move forward with developing that pathway.

Once the subject area is decided, the Steering Committee votes on adopting the proposed pathway. After approval, the work is split among three core parties (shown in brown sections of figure below):

- A Pathway Taskforce comprised of K-12, higher education, and industry partners who set the vision and lay the foundation for the pathway's components and goals;

- The nonprofit staff, who activate a professional learning community of teachers, industry partners, and higher education partners to carry out the vision for the new pathway; and

- The Steering Committee, who determines how districts access shared resources in support of the new pathway, including staff, mobile learning labs, equipment, virtual options, and transportation.
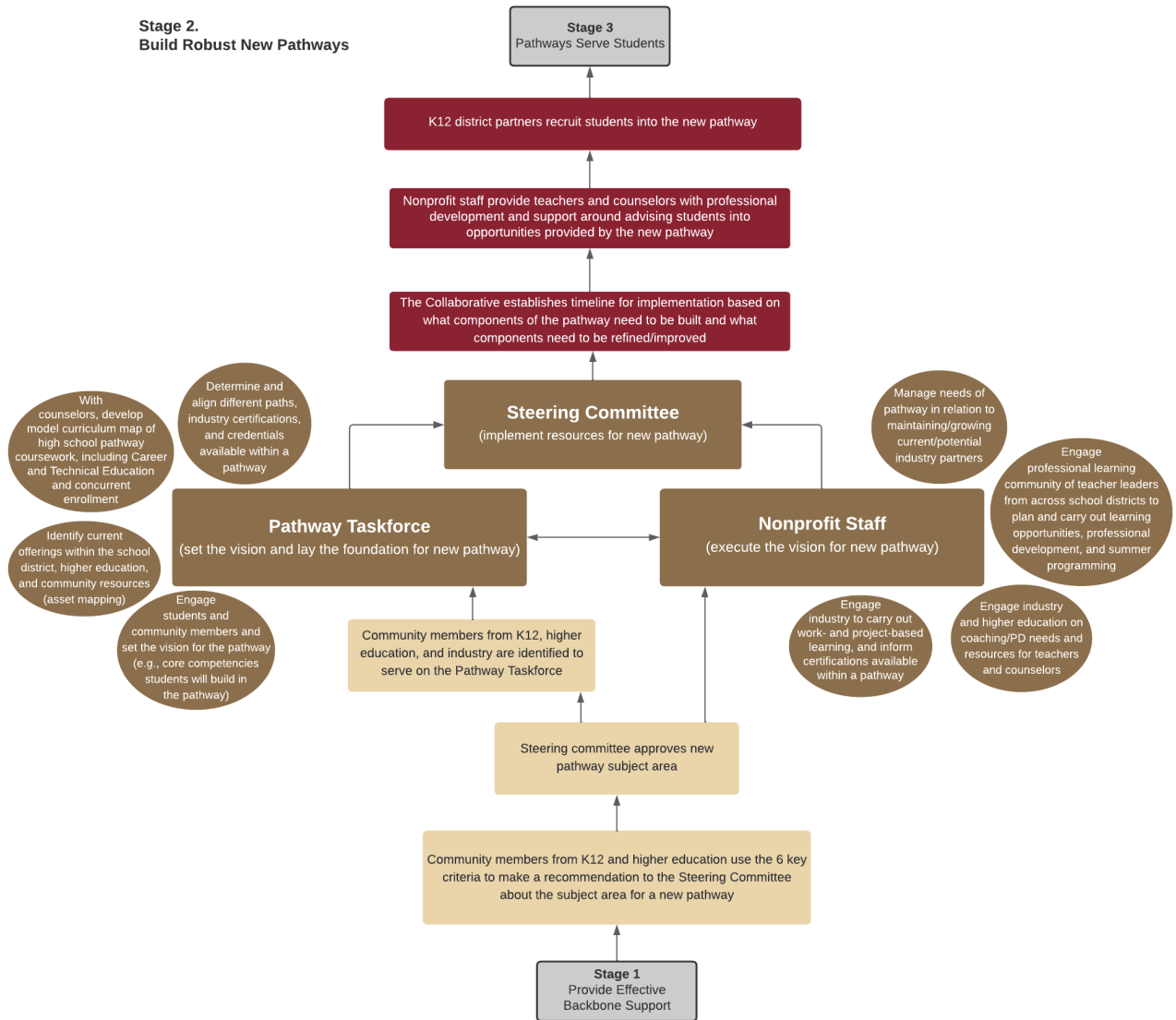
The work of each group informs the timeline for implementation. When the launch of the new pathway is imminent, the nonprofit staff provide professional development for teachers and counselors so that students are successfully advised into new pathways. This capacity-building for school staff takes them beyond traditional advising and builds up their knowledge of courses, work-based learning, and internships for the new pathway. This also instills greater internal alignment within each district, where staff understand how new pathways are included in graduation requirements rather than added as a new requirement. These elements of shared resources and professional development around advising foster the building and strengthening of relationships between K-12 districts and higher education partners and reinforce alignment on the goal of "college and career" pathways where students end up in careers where they can thrive.

The final step in Stage 2 is then to recruit students into the new pathway. K-12 partner districts accomplish this by leveraging peer-to-peer mentoring among high school students, summer camps, career exploration opportunities, participation in Mobile Learning Labs, and even programs like TRIO/Upward Bound, which help ensure pathways are serving the students furthest from opportunity.
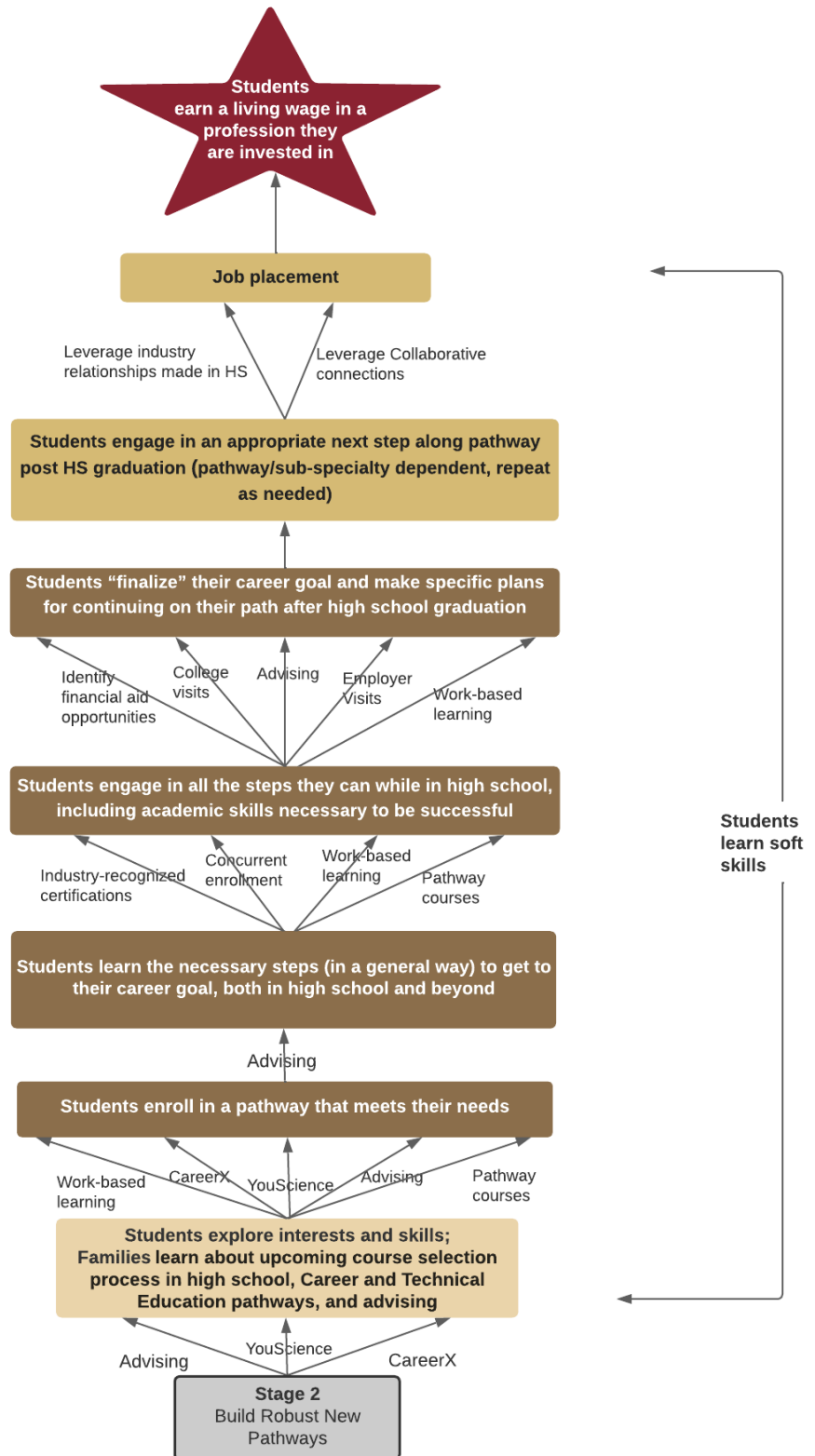
# Stage 3: Pathways Serve Students

**Stage 3.**
**Pathways Serve Students**

Key

⭐ North Star long-term outcome

▬ After high school

▬ During high school

▬ Middle school/early high school

*Note not all arrows must all always apply

**Students earn a living wage in a profession they are invested in**

**Job placement**

Leverage industry relationships made in HS

Leverage Collaborative connections

**Students engage in an appropriate next step along pathway post HS graduation (pathway/sub-specialty dependent, repeat as needed)**

**Students "finalize" their career goal and make specific plans for continuing on their path after high school graduation**

Identify financial aid opportunities

College visits

Advising

Employer Visits

Work-based learning

**Students engage in all the steps they can while in high school, including academic skills necessary to be successful**

Industry-recognized certifications

Concurrent enrollment

Work-based learning

Pathway courses

**Students learn the necessary steps (in a general way) to get to their career goal, both in high school and beyond**

Advising

**Students enroll in a pathway that meets their needs**

Work-based learning

CareerX

YouScience

Advising

Pathway courses

**Students explore interests and skills; Families learn about upcoming course selection process in high school, Career and Technical Education pathways, and advising**

Advising

YouScience

CareerX

**Stage 2**
**Build Robust New Pathways**

Students learn soft skills

Stage 3 describes the key experiences students have when engaged in a pathway. This stage represents the final step along the ultimate goal of reaching the "North Star" outcome that students earn a living wage in a profession they are invested in.

This stage outlines the ways students are served by pathways as they relate to key timepoints: middle school, where students explore their interests and skills through self-assessments and engage in career exploration to learn about careers, and where families learn about the upcoming course selection process in high school, Career and Technical Education pathways, and advising; high school, where students choose what pathways they want to pursue, engage in in-depth learning and experiences related to their pathway, finalize their career goals, and make postsecondary plans; and after high school, where students engage in their next step along their career pathway, get placed in a job, and continue to leverage relationships and connections fostered by the Collaborative's partnerships.

This model provides students with flexibility in how they achieve their end goal. While higher education is one trajectory leading to a living wage in a profession a student is invested in, so are earning industry-recognized credentials or entering a career directly through an apprenticeship. Once again, although this guide discusses "career pathways," the approach is better described as "college and career pathways."

# Next Steps

With the ongoing support of the nonprofit, the Collaborative is well-positioned to build and sustain career pathways that serve diverse students from across the region for years to come. Success depends on school district and higher education members collectively agreeing to continue to 1) strategically align and share resources to achieve a common goal, and 2) stand up the nonprofit as a backbone organization to facilitate coordination and management of career pathways while keeping the Collaborative's mission central when decisions are difficult.

This guide describes the structure of the Collaborative and makes explicit some of the many assumptions underlying the work. It does not address measuring success, monitoring progress, or identifying and addressing the inevitable barriers to success. A supplement to this guide, forthcoming in spring 2023, will identify places throughout the four stages where barriers to success are most likely to occur and make recommendations for thoughtful measurement and data collection. Based on this information, the Collaborative can, with the support of the nonprofit, determine what data to collect regularly to monitor progress and support continuous improvement.

Establishing regular, meaningful data review and reporting processes will help the Collaborative make decisions that elevate the needs and contributions of all stakeholders. By facilitating smart use of data, the nonprofit will demonstrate the value of Collaborative members' own financial contributions (via dues) and strengthen the case for additional funding from other sources, all while minimizing the burden on Collaborative members themselves.

# Endnotes

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