

BACK-TO-SCHOOL

BLUEPRINT

PLANNING FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE AFTER COVID-19

POSTSECONDARY READINESS

POSTSECONDARY READINESS



The COVID-19 pandemic has sent shock waves through the educational system, impacting students from preschool to graduate school. During unprecedented school closures, many students lacked access to the resources and information they needed to make key decisions about their futures. With an uncertain return to schools, campuses, and training programs in the fall, students are faced with difficult decisions related to their college and career plans. In a poll from [MassINC](#), 43% of respondents with limited internet access and 40% of those with too few devices said they are likely to at least delay their child's college enrollment. Black and Latino respondents were more likely to report some changes to college plans compared to their white peers.

In a pandemic that has disproportionately impacted our most marginalized students, including low-income students and students of color, it is increasingly important to provide students with supports to define and reach their self-constructed ideas of success. As COVID-19 has disrupted traditional pathways and transitions, we need to do more to support students' postsecondary needs by building a strong foundation of career and college programming and delivering innovative content during remote or hybrid learning. This guide provides strategies for educators and school leaders to support students with career exploration, college preparation, and civic readiness. Though the guide highlights a few resource-intensive strategies, most guidance focuses on supports that educators can deliver either in-person or virtually with existing resources.

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WHY IS POSTSECONDARY READINESS RELEVANT NOW?

AN INTRODUCTION TO POSTSECONDARY READINESS

Unexpected school closures during the 2019-20 school year impacted postsecondary planning for all students, with particular implications for high school youth. The unknowns created by COVID led many young people to reconsider their college plans. For others, the economic shutdown meant missed internships, job shadow days, or career exploration activities.

With the education sector facing a myriad of unknowns, students are seeking postsecondary guidance that responds to the economic and social realities of the pandemic. As this guide will demonstrate, many students faced inequitable access to college and career readiness programming before COVID. The pandemic has further exacerbated these inequities.

Postsecondary readiness opportunities that prepare students for college and career should be available to all students in the Commonwealth—as should the opportunity for students to design their own futures based upon their interests and skills. This requires educators to break down students' expectations about options that are—or are not—available to them based on their socioeconomic status, race, or gender. In doing so, educators expose students to a variety of potential postsecondary pathways. These include, but are not limited to, public or private colleges and universities, community colleges, career and technical schools, vocational and trade schools, continuing education centers, and apprenticeship programs.

Massachusetts Definition of Career Readiness and Civic Participation

As defined by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), “Students who are college and career ready will demonstrate the knowledge, skills and abilities that are necessary to successfully complete entry-level, credit-bearing college courses, participate in certificate or workplace training programs, and enter economically viable career pathways.”

In order to meet this goal, the Commonwealth has defined a set of learning competencies, intellectual capacities, and experiences essential for all



students to become lifelong learners; positive contributors to their families, workplaces, and communities; and successfully engaged citizens of a global 21st century:

1. Achieve college- and career-ready levels of competence in English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics
2. Build competencies for workplace readiness
3. Focus on applying academic strategies to problem solving in diverse professional and life contexts, appropriate to individual student goals

POSTSECONDARY READINESS CONSIDERATIONS FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS

No two students are alike, and neither should be the approach to supporting their postsecondary goals. In particular, schools must purposefully support their special populations, who face additional hurdles to achieving postsecondary success. Below are considerations for English Learners and students with disabilities:

English Learners (ELs)

- **Enroll EL students in grade-level and rigorous courses** to ensure that they meet requirements for college or career skills
- **Maintain strong, asset-based communication with parents** to help co-construct students' plans for the future, recognizing that many secondary-level ELs are likely to be first-generation college students
- **Stay informed and maintain confidentiality on a student's citizenship status**, and ensure that they are properly informed of financial aid and college access legislation
- **Ensure that EL students and families have access to the same information** on college and career as their peers by translating all documents and information into home languages

Students with Disabilities

- In IEP teams, work to prepare students for the challenges, demands, and rigor of higher education through **a clearly defined transition planning process** that addresses education/training, independent living, employment, and community participation
- For **college-going students, work with a school counselor** to identify the appropriate offices within colleges or universities to ensure that appropriate accommodations are provided
- **Work with students to instill self-advocacy skills** as students have a larger role in disclosing disabilities and getting accommodations once they graduate from high school
- **Advise students and families on the range of diploma options available for students with disabilities** that could include inclusive concurrent enrollment opportunities, like the offerings from the state-funded [Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative \(MAICEI\)](#)

EQUITY IMPLICATIONS IN POSTSECONDARY READINESS

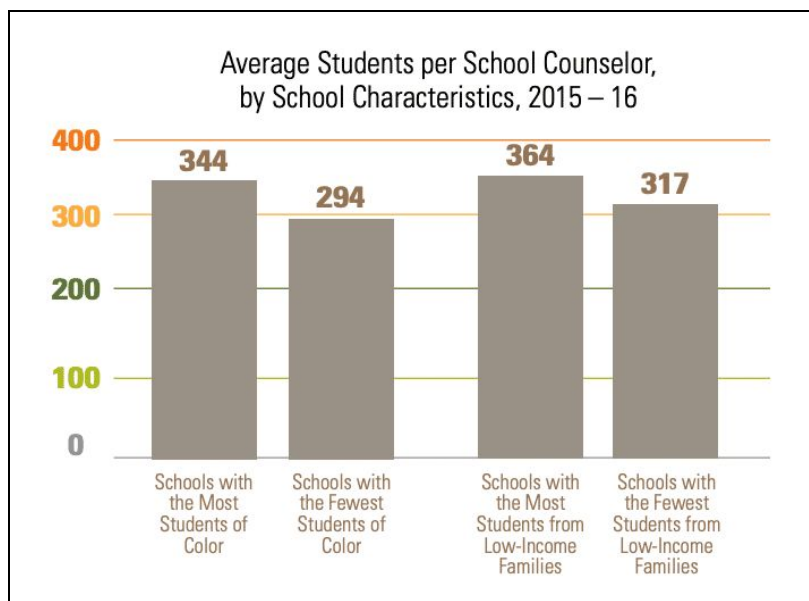
COVID-19 has widened the inequities that students of color, low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities have traditionally faced in education. As the next section will detail, inequities in the presence and expertise of school counselors, in access to grade-level content, and in school-based college and career supports often lead to missed postsecondary opportunities for marginalized students.

Inequities in School Counselors

School counselors play a critical role in college and career exploration and advising. A [2019 report](#) from the American Institutes for Research details the role of school counselors as gatekeepers of college and career information:

"School counselors play a unique role in actualizing personalized learning and ensuring students are college-and-career or postsecondary ready."

Unfortunately, there are significant inequities in access to school counselors. Though the American School Counselor Association recommends that schools maintain a ratio of 250 students per school counselor, Massachusetts schools with higher concentrations of students of color and low-income students miss that mark. The figure below from [the Education Trust](#) details inequities in access to school counselors in Massachusetts.



Inequities in Grade-Level Content

As detailed in the Rennie Center's [Accessing Grade-Level Content Action Guide](#), access to grade-appropriate instructional materials shrinks opportunity and achievement gaps between students and reduces the need for remedial postsecondary coursework. **Remedial coursework,**

also known as **developmental education** or basic skills courses, "...consist of below-college-level noncredit courses and trainings in reading, writing, and math that are aimed at teaching students the academic competencies necessary to succeed in college-level coursework" ([Center for American Progress](#), 2016).

Unfortunately, too many students, specifically low-income students and students of color, consistently lack access to rigorous instruction and materials and end up in remedial courses, spending precious time and money making up content they should have learned in their K-12 schooling. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, **60%** of community college students, **22%** of state university students, and **10%** of UMass students take at least one remedial course ([The Vision Project](#)).

“While more students than ever before are enrolling in college, far fewer are succeeding once they get there. Nationwide, 40 percent of college students (including 66 percent of Black college students and 53 percent of Latinx college students) take at least one remedial course, where they spend time and money learning skills they were told they’d already mastered in high school.

Graduates who opt for a career straight out of high school aren’t faring much better, with many employers reporting that high school graduates enter their roles missing the skills they need to do their jobs well.”

— [TNTP](#)

Inequities in College and Career Pathway Supports: Teacher and Principal Perspectives

Teachers and principals provide important perspectives on inequities in school-based postsecondary supports. A [RAND Corporation study](#) investigated the link between school supports and school context to better understand the root causes of gaps in preparation and outcomes. Overall, the study uncovered the following challenges:

Educator Reports of Most-Needed Postsecondary Pathway Supports

- More than half of principals and teachers cited a need for K-12 and higher education institutions to **collaborate to align academic pathways**.
- Teachers in high-poverty and majority nonwhite schools cited a need for **family engagement supports**.

Educator Reports of Most-Needed Career Pathway Supports

- Educators voiced a need for **engagement with the local business community**, professional development for school employees on career readiness, high school career-technical courses, and career pathway programs.

- Principals in high-poverty schools were significantly more likely to cite **local business community support** as a need, demonstrating potential inequities in access to career pathway supports.

COVID-19's IMPACT ON POSTSECONDARY READINESS



With COVID-19 looming over a new academic year, postsecondary institutions are scrambling to create plans that take into account students' safety, academic, and social needs. For middle and high school students, the pandemic means that postsecondary readiness opportunities look different than they did before. While higher education institutions around the world innovate to adapt to the new normal, school districts must do the same to prepare youth for the opportunities that await them.

Districts, higher education, and education research organizations are already highlighting potential solutions. [Achieving the Dream](#) points to co-requisite classes—in which students take both remedial and credit-bearing courses at the same time—as one method to “reduce dependence on development education.”

However, in order to create a robust set of priorities and solutions, it is necessary to listen to the perspectives of students as they update their plans due to COVID-19. Some of those perspectives are listed below.

COVID-19 and the US higher education enrollment: Preparing leaders for fall

The following section details findings from a [McKinsey and Company study](#) regarding COVID-19 and US higher education enrollment. Understanding student perspectives is key to ensuring that students have the support and information they need to plan for the future. Though this article surveys college-aspiring students, there is a need for research on students who will choose other pathways, including entry directly into the workforce.

- A significant portion of students reported that COVID-19 has affected their readiness, willingness, or ability to attend a higher education institution. Among Hispanic or Latino students, **41 percent** report a strong or extremely strong impact on their ability to afford school; **40 percent** of students from lower-income households report the same.

- **Up to 15 percent** of students may defer attending college by at least a semester, and **up to 45 percent** may look for a different school.
- **Less than half (40 percent)** of students from lower-income households report being able to get the necessary equipment for remote learning compared with **72 percent** of students from high-income households.

As we approach the fall and the precarious transition back into the classroom, schools must be equipped to provide students with timely and accurate information about postsecondary pathways as they adapt to a remote, hybrid, or cautiously in-person world. An [article from the RAND Corporation](#), summarized below, details initial steps that schools can take to navigate college and career readiness in a time of uncertainty.

- **Stay connected** with students to share key information and guidance on postsecondary pathways. Schools should find ways to connect school counselors and other supports to students remotely. Ensuring that all students have access to a device and internet is paramount in this process.
- **Stay informed** about how postsecondary institutions are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes information on college admissions requirements, financial aid options, and campus visits.
- **Stay innovative** in your approach to supporting college and career readiness. Look to out-of-school time providers and community organizations to diversify how students receive information about their futures.

COMPONENTS OF POSTSECONDARY READINESS

ACTION GUIDE OVERVIEW

This guide details school and classroom strategies related to career exploration, college advising, and civic readiness. Together, these areas provide a strong foundation for comprehensive and equitable postsecondary preparation for all students.

For districts and schools that already have a strong foundation in place, the guide describes ways to think bigger about postsecondary readiness through early college and career pathways programs.

COMPONENTS OF POSTSECONDARY READINESS



Career Exploration

This section discusses strategies to advance real-world learning, career exploration curricula, and employability skills.



College Advising

This section provides information about the necessary components of college advising, including virtual tours, financial aid, and application support.



Civic Readiness

This section describes the pertinence of civics education, its support of postsecondary pathways, and how to prepare students for their broader participation in civic life after high school as responsible citizens.

THINKING BIGGER



Thinking Bigger: Early College

This section reviews the design principles of early college programs and key considerations for getting started.



Thinking Bigger: Career Pathways Programs

This section highlights programs that offer workforce credentials, particularly those in Massachusetts, and relays steps to getting similar programs started in schools.

SCHOOL-BASED STRATEGIES

CAREER EXPLORATION

This section details the **benefits of career exploration** programming and highlights strategies for getting started.

WHY CAREER EXPLORATION MATTERS

The secondary grades are a time of immense personal development, when students are naturally driven to figure out who they are, who they want to be, and how they fit into the world around them. This is an inherently uncertain period in their young lives, and the social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have only added to uncertainty about what the future may hold.

Career exploration is a key strategy to help students navigate the unknown by gaining insight about their trajectory and researching possible futures. High-quality career exploration activities guide students to incorporate both career knowledge—learning about different types of jobs and the prerequisites for accessing them—and self-understanding—recognizing their own strengths and interests. Through a process of learning about modern work opportunities and practicing the skills that will support their success in the workplace, students begin to see a clearer picture of the career goals they can work towards and the preparation it will take to get there.

Career exploration is not an alternative to college preparation, but an essential part of it. Some students may identify careers that they hope to pursue immediately after high school, but many others will identify potential careers that require higher education, giving them greater focus as they prepare for (and work through) college.

Career exploration can take a variety of forms, but the best approaches support students to develop and grow in three main areas:

1. Learn more about themselves, their passions, skills, and goals.
2. Learn more about their options, and the education & training pathways to get there.
3. Access data to make informed decisions on which options they want to pursue.

This section highlights strategies and considerations to support career exploration as schools reopen in the fall, including **Career Exploration Curricula & Practice**, **Project-Based Learning**, **'Employability Skills,'** and **Individualized Learning Plans**.

What Students Say

Too many students, in Massachusetts and across the nation, report that their schools offer minimal opportunities for career exploration. The quotes below, from Rennie Center focus groups

with current and recent Massachusetts students, illustrate this problem. These students' voices point to a need for comprehensive career exploration and planning beginning early in a student's academic career.

“I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I didn’t understand what I was passionate about.”

“There is an expectation to know what you want right out of high school but nothing to help navigate that.”

“I think coming out of elementary school is the perfect time to set up programs for kids, so they can figure out what they want to do as a career.”

“High school treats you like a child. Why not prepare me for what I need to do? Taxes, a resume, properly owning a car? Why I shouldn't have a loan for \$200,000? Scholarships? High school isn’t teaching you the right content, at the right time, or in the right format.”

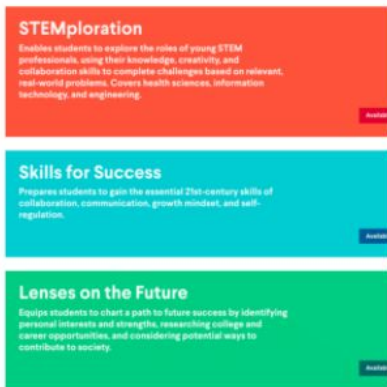
— Youth Focus Group Participants

CAREER EXPLORATION CURRICULA

To make informed decisions about their future, students need access to clear, high-quality information about the variety of college and career opportunities available to them. Career exploration curricula provide structured learning experiences, allowing students to research pathways that interest them and learn about what it would take to pursue these opportunities.

High-quality career exploration curricula provide avenues for students to investigate a variety of industry sectors and in-demand careers; understand the cross-sector knowledge and competencies needed to be successful in these careers; and develop plans to effectively navigate high school and postsecondary education to attain the necessary training and credentials.

Below are examples of career exploration curricula that provide opportunities for career exploration in a variety of fields. Career exploration activities, many of which take place online, are well-suited for remote instruction. Educators can advance student learning during school closures by assigning online career exploration activities and devoting time during virtual class meetings to debrief students' work.



Possible Futures Curriculum
by Jobs for the Future



Roadtrip Nation Experience Programs
by Roadtrip Nation Education



Quest for Success Curriculum
by America Achieves

JFF Possible Futures Curriculum

This [interactive career exploration curriculum](#) helps students in grades 6 through 10 explore STEM occupations, develop essential skills such as collaboration and communication, and learn how to positively contribute to their communities.

Roadtrip Nation Experience Programs

These [project-based programs](#) use a blended learning format to foster authentic career exploration, offering interactive lessons and engaging multimedia content that combine real-world learning with opportunities for introspection.

Quest for Success Curriculum

This [open education resource](#) is offered to schools completely free of charge and includes options for online learning throughout. The course is designed with educator and student input, to focus on the following in-demand competencies: 1) Applied knowledge, 2) Relational skills & personal attributes, 3) Executive & communication skills, 4) Career navigation skills, 5) Postsecondary transitions knowledge & skills, 6) Financial literacy, and 7) Civic engagement.

CAREER EXPLORATION IN PRACTICE

In addition to integrated career exploration curriculum, opportunities to explore or test-drive potential career pathways through hands-on practice can expose youth to different types of careers. For students from low-income backgrounds and those living in areas of concentrated poverty, schools have an important role to play in filling any gaps in knowledge of potential fields and career paths—offering ways to connect students to real-world job experiences can provide a pathway to postsecondary success for each and every student.

The section below describes multiple ways that students can explore careers outside of in-school curriculum.

Job Shadowing

As noted by the Rennie Center's report on [Career Pathways for Boston's Opportunity Youth](#), "Job shadowing days can help students get a hands-on feel for what it's like to engage in a particular career; these are especially useful for service providers seeking to help students determine whether a particular program (and career path) is the right fit."

This [resource from Education Planner](#) describes how to set up a job shadowing program at your school.

Internships, Apprenticeships, or Short-Term Opportunities

Refinement of career-ready skills requires practice. For high schoolers to feel confident, this practice will preferably take place in a low stakes environment, like an internship or apprenticeship that still allows students to experience the realities of the work day.

This relationship is mutually beneficial, as these programs "can also help [schools and] service providers refine their training models and related supports by clarifying their immediate and future workforce needs. That is, employers can speak to the demand side of the career pipeline, helping providers supply employees who meet those needs" ([Rennie Center](#), 2019).

The [article from the Hechinger Report](#) explains the importance of high school internships for low-income students, as they "connect the dots between work and school and visualize college and career pathways they previously thought were unattainable."

Volunteer Work or Community Service

Volunteering for a project or organization can be both empowering and educational. Students can learn about different job tasks while also cultivating their interests in a particular field. Volunteering can be a particularly good option for younger students and their families.

Sites like [idealist.org](#) and [VolunteerMatch.org](#) offer opportunities for students and families to get involved with their communities.

Summer or Part-Time Jobs

Summer or part-time jobs allow students to earn money while exploring potential career options. Schools can work to uncover students' interests and match them with local, accessible part-time job options by making connections with area businesses.

"Jobs...provide students with more immediate benefits, such as learning how to interact and communicate with adults, take on leadership responsibilities, and manage money. They also acquire many of the other soft skills that employers are increasingly saying are just as important as academic achievements or technical ability" ([Education Dive](#), 2018).

Summer or Out-of-School Programs

Many out-of-school programs allow for hands-on, relevant curriculum and exposure to the required knowledge associated with career fields. Local colleges and universities may also offer summer career and college exploration programs, which can offer unique mentorship opportunities with older students.

The following websites, collected by [Career Vision](#), provide information on a wide assortment of academic and career-themed camps: [The Camp Channel](#), [Allen's Guide](#), and [My Summer Camps](#).

Virtual Career Exploration Solutions

"Practitioners can also explore creative and/or digital solutions that allow students to experience new careers, such as online systems that connect students directly with individuals in different professions and virtual reality simulators that mimic the conditions of a given workplace." ([Rennie Center](#), 2019)

[This link](#) provides a compilation of virtual career exploration and job shadowing resources for students.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING FOR CAREER EXPLORATION

In today's knowledge economy—in which career success hinges on such "cross-sector competencies" as communication, problem-solving, and collaboration—**project-based learning (PBL)** can be one of the most impactful instructional strategies to support career exploration. Educators can incorporate project-based career exploration activities at all grade levels, from elementary school through high school. Effective PBL offers students rich opportunities to learn about themselves, discover new strengths and interests, and develop key skills for the workplace. A [2017 review by MDRC](#) concluded that the goals and principles of PBL are well-aligned with "the focus on higher-level thinking skills" and developing students' "socioemotional competencies."

Not all PBL is created equal, of course. To maximize the potential for PBL to support career exploration and readiness, projects should be intentionally designed around a clear, shared vision for what a career-ready graduate should know and be able to do. Beyond intentionality, the following bullet points are characteristics of effective project-based learning:

- ❑ The project involves **real-world tasks & tools**

- ❑ Students are provided with **clear learning goal(s)** and a **structured grading rubric**
- ❑ Students are presented with an **authentic, challenging problem** or driving question, and inquiry for that problem is rigorous and sustained over time
- ❑ **Students are given choice** on important aspects of the project and have opportunities to **work independently**
- ❑ Students are provided with **frequent, structured opportunities** to give and receive feedback about the quality of their work

Organizing PBL specifically around career-oriented problems and performance tasks can be a great way to ensure students are developing the core workplace competencies they'll need to succeed in the world of work. In [this video](#), America Achieves presents the case for career-oriented project-based learning. As an accompaniment to the video, check out this set of free, [career-oriented performance tasks](#) and teacher tools to support implementation from America Achieves.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT “EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS”

Preparing students for postsecondary success in both college and career requires knowledge of the skills and dispositions prioritized by employers. Understanding essential "employability skills," or cross-sector competencies, will help educators guide students' personal and academic development.

Identified through a review of national research and data in consultation with industry experts, the Illinois State Board of Education recently released its Recommended Technical & Essential Employability Competencies, which include the following top 10 essential cross-sector competency statements:

1. **Teamwork and Conflict Resolution:** Students can use their understanding of working cooperatively with others to complete work assignments and achieve mutual goals.
2. **Communication:**
 - a. **Verbal:** Students can use their understanding of English grammar and public speaking, listening, and responding, convey an idea, express information, and be understood by others.
 - b. **Written:** Students can use their understanding of standard business English to ensure that written work is clear, direct, courteous, and grammatically correct.
 - c. **Digital:** Students can use their understanding of email, keyboarding, word processing, and digital media to convey work that is clear, direct, courteous, and grammatically correct.
3. **Problem Solving:** Students can use their critical thinking skills to generate and evaluate solutions as they relate to the needs of the team, customer, and company.

4. **Decision Making:** Students can use their understanding of problem solving to implement and communicate solutions.
5. **Critical Thinking:** Students can use their understanding of logic and reasoning to analyze and address problems.
6. **Adaptability and Flexibility:** Students can use their understanding of workplace change and variety to be open to new ideas and handle ambiguity.
7. **Initiative and Self-Drive:** Students can use their understanding of goal setting and personal impact to achieve professional goals and understand personal impact.
8. **Reliability and Accountability:** Students can use their understanding of commitment, time management, and follow through to ensure that a professional team functions properly and meets collective goals.
9. **Cultural Competence:** Students can use their understanding of diversity and inclusion to communicate and work effectively across a multitude of abilities, cultures, and backgrounds.
10. **Planning and Organizing:** Students can use their understanding of time management to plan effectively and accomplish assigned tasks.

Incorporating these skills into career exploration and college readiness programming can provide students with the tools to be successful in their pathway of choice. However, it is important not to over-prioritize consistent achievement and success. Making mistakes and struggling are a part of every student's experience, and normalizing failure will instill important values of perseverance and self-compassion. Focusing students' attention on learning from mistakes, rather than prioritizing consistent perfection, can help decrease anxiety and promote a growth mindset that lends itself to better academic outcomes. The resources included in the [toolkit from Edutopia](#) reframe failure as a valuable learning experience.

Addressing *White Supremacy Culture* in Employability Skills

Just as the pandemic has magnified long-standing inequities in our school systems, we must also think critically about the workplaces we are preparing students to enter. In a society shaped by centuries of systemic racism, our workplaces still strongly favor whiteness, defining standards of "professionalism" or "employability" according to white and Western standards related to dress code, speech, and work style.

“The coronavirus outbreak has put a mirror in front of our faces, magnifying the inequities in our school systems—and in our society—that too many of us have allowed to exist without question.”

— Dr. Dena Simmons, [Why COVID-19 is our Equity Check](#)

Many of the cross-sector competencies explored above are shaped heavily by what American grassroots organizer-scholars Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones have outlined as [white supremacy culture](#). While the words "white supremacy" may initially conjure images of domestic terrorist groups such as the KKK and their modern counterparts, Okun and Jones push us to recognize the idea more broadly, defining a series of characteristics that show up in all areas of our lives—especially in the workplace—that center white and Western values as "the norm," and superior to other ethnic, racial, and regional identities and customs. As Okun and Jones discuss,

"Because we all live in a white supremacy culture, these characteristics show up in the attitudes and behaviors of all of us—white people and people of color. Therefore, these attitudes and behaviors can show up in any group or organization, whether it is predominantly white or predominantly people of color."

Recognizing and addressing the characteristics of white supremacy culture that are embedded in the standards for professionalism is critical to helping prepare students of color for workplaces dominated by white norms. Working to dismantle and reshape these standards to be supportive and affirming of all identities comes after.

[This article from Diverse Education](#) focuses on preparing students, particularly students of color, for the reality of white-dominant workplace culture. While these strategies were written for college students, they apply to students entering the workplace at any age.

THINKING BIGGER: INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING PLANS

Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs), also referred to as Student Success Plans, offer a powerful approach to identifying each student's unique developmental trajectory while empowering them with the agency to drive their own progress. An ILP is both a tool and a process, typically used with students in middle and high school. Though implementing ILPs represents a heavier lift for school-based teams than some of the strategies described above, it has powerful benefits for college and career planning.

A student-driven tool, an ILP captures how students' academic plans align with their unique set of interests, needs, and learning goals, as well as with graduation requirements and college prerequisites. The process of creating and maintaining their ILP—conducted in collaboration with teachers, counselors, and/or parents—engages students in setting goals, making choices, and advocating for themselves, all skills that strengthen their readiness for postsecondary and lifelong learning. The personalization and individual support associated with ILPs can bolster students' confidence in their postsecondary options and motivate students to pursue experiences that support their goals.

Overall, ILPs support **career readiness** efforts by:

- Enabling youth to develop career goals that align with their interests, skills, and values.

- Guiding youth to pursue academic courses and postsecondary training and degree programs needed to enter their desired careers.
- Encouraging youth to pursue out-of-school and work-based learning opportunities to continue developing their workforce readiness skills. ([Read more here](#))

Overall, ILPs support **college readiness** efforts by:

- Creating stronger connections between schools and students, by inviting students to take ownership of their learning experiences.
- Raising awareness of the relevance and utility of postsecondary training in helping youth pursue self-defined career goals.
- Helping students recognize the middle and high school courses they need to complete in order to enroll in rigorous postsecondary coursework ([Read more here](#))

If your school or district is interested in implementing individualized learning plans for students, there are many emerging resources and exemplars. The Rhode Island Department of Education released a [Toolkit on Individual Learning Plan Development and Implementation](#) that can provide a backbone for your school's development of such a plan. The [video from RIDE](#) describes Rhode Island's ILP plan in detail.

Best Practices for Implementing ILPs

The following best practices were identified through the Rennie Center's report on Charting a Path to the Future Through Individualized Learning Plans. The full report can be [read here](#) and features programs from across the Commonwealth.

- 1. Tailor ILPs to students' interests, strengths, and learning needs—** ILPs depend on the authentic participation and agency of students in crafting an educational experience that reflects their genuine skills and interests.
- 2. Build students' ownership of their learning goals—** Students should take the lead in their ILP goal-setting.
- 3. Pursue a collaborative, relationship-driven approach—** ILPs work best when all parties are invested and when students are able to develop strong relationships with the teachers who support their planning and work.
- 4. Provide strong leadership and encourage commitment to ILPs—** Successful implementation of ILPs requires the clear articulation of school-level goals and a strong commitment from educators.
- 5. Dedicate time and resources—** All ILPs require dedicated time and resources. Empirical studies suggest that ILP planning and career exploration activities should occur at least two to three times per week.

- 6. Monitor progress systematically**— Web-based career readiness systems can be highly effective tools for synthesizing career exploration and awareness activities, documenting goals and achievements, and monitoring progress.

“Many students will be entering schools in the fall 5-6 months after they were last in buildings. Creating an individual learning plan with student specific learning goals, social and emotional supports, and coordination with providers is one way to support all students who are each re-entering with such an extreme spectrum of needs.”

— Julia Rafal-Baer, COO Chiefs for Change ([full interview here](#))

Many of the strategies included in the Rennie Center's [Accessing Essential Services Action Guide](#) are relevant to ILPs. Educators can view this action guide for resources and student supports to include in an ILP, including academic, social-emotional, and wellness-based ideas.

COLLEGE ADVISING

This section reviews strategies for educators to support students through the entirety of the **college admissions process**.



College and career exploration should begin as early as possible in a student's academic career. In elementary and middle school, educators and family members can begin talking to students about their interests and aspirations. Caring adults in each child's life can help children understand how their strengths and goals connect to college and career opportunities.

As students progress into high school, college and career advising becomes a core element of the academic program. This section offers strategies that educators can use to help students explore college options and complete applications, either virtually or in person.

UNDERSTANDING COLLEGE OPTIONS

In preparing for postsecondary education, each student must navigate a complicated web of private vs. public, local vs. out-of-state, and 2-year vs. 4-year options. The section below includes strategies to expose students to a range of college options.

Panel Discussion

Students, particularly those who will be the first in their family to attend college, benefit from the opportunity to learn about their older peers' college experiences. Educators can invite recent graduates to share their college experiences via videoconference or in person during an advisory period. When inviting graduates to share their experiences, educators should include a range of perspectives. This may include:

- Students attending local community colleges who plan to enter directly into the workforce after graduation
- Students attending local community colleges who plan to transfer to a four-year institution
- Students attending public and private four-year colleges

- Students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs)
- Students at urban, suburban, and rural institutions

Virtual College Tours

With campuses closed due to COVID, many colleges have started offering virtual tours. Educators can support students by asking them to complete a series of virtual tours and reflect on their impressions. [YouVisit](#) offers free virtual tours of over 600 colleges. If a college is not listed here, students should visit the college's admissions page to determine if a virtual tour has been posted online. For students who are just beginning to think about college, educators should encourage students to consider a range of options including community college, public universities, and private colleges.

Online Resources

Students benefit from learning about the ways in which others like them have navigated the college and career process. [Roadtrip Nation](#) offers a series of videos for students with a variety of backgrounds, career interests, and life experiences. The website offers a wide selection of videos, including those focused on the benefits of community college, the college and career process for undocumented students, and the experiences of students who are the first in their family to attend higher education.

Key Considerations

As students reflect on college options, educators and counselors should devote time for students to explore the academic, social, and emotional aspects of college life. A few key considerations are listed below.

Academic Program Offerings

For students who already know what they want to study, it is important to select a college that offers a strong program in their desired major. During an advisory period, educators can direct students to the [College Data tool](#), where students can search for colleges by major. After narrowing down their lists to a few top choices, students can search college websites and contact admissions offices for key information, such as graduation and job placement rates within their desired major.

Accessibility

When it comes to [services for students with disabilities and English learners \(ELs\)](#), not all colleges are the same. Educators should work with students to research the disability and English learner supports available on each campus. For students with disabilities, educators should provide students with information about how to register with college disability services offices to request accommodations. English learners should receive guidance from educators on how to access tailored EL services on college campuses.

Many colleges and universities offer support related to reading, writing, oral presentations, and interviews for ELs.

Affordability

College affordability is a complex topic. In order to determine the real cost of their college options, students must gain an understanding of tuition prices, fees, grants, scholarships, and other forms of financial aid. Educators can use the [College Board's Net Price Calculator](#) to help students gain an understanding of the actual cost of each of their college choices.

In addition to considering the cost of college, students benefit from the opportunity to explore the return on investment (ROI) of various college options. Though a particular college may be less expensive in the short term, this factor must be considered alongside college graduation rates, job placement rates, and future earning potential, all of which ultimately influence affordability. Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce offers [postsecondary ROI tools](#) that educators can use with students.

Extracurricular Opportunities

Extracurricular opportunities are a key component of campus life. Students should be given time to explore the clubs and activities that each of their colleges of interest offer. For example, students may look for affinity groups for those who share their identity, including an alliance for LGBTQ students and associations for students of color. They may seek opportunities to participate in a capella, dance, or basketball. By searching college websites, connecting with current students, and talking with admissions officers, students can gain a comprehensive understanding of extracurricular options.

Inclusivity

Students thrive when they feel at home on a college campus. To assess whether an institution offers an inclusive, welcoming environment that reflects and values diverse identities, students can seek information on the current student population. Educators should provide time for students to explore the [U.S. Department of Education's College Navigator site](#) or the College Board's Big Future search page to understand the demographics of the student body.

All students, and particularly those who are underrepresented in higher education, should be connected to the college admissions office, where they can ask to speak with a current student who shares a similar background. Educators should empower students to ask detailed questions as they work to determine which college is right for them.

Location

One of the biggest considerations that students face in the college search is proximity to home. Some students prefer access to family resources and support as they navigate the

college transition. Students may also save money by commuting to college rather than living on campus.

Other students prefer the social aspects of living on a college campus. Many are excited by the opportunity to live in a new location for several years. Those interested in attending college away from home must consider whether they prefer an urban, suburban, or rural college campus. For example, urban campuses typically offer heightened access to city resources, while rural campuses often provide access to ample green space.

Size

The size of a college has a tremendous influence on student experience. While some students benefit from a tight-knit community in which they have personal relationships with each professor, others prefer large institutions that offer a wide range of majors and extracurricular programs (Velasco, 2020). Educators should encourage students to explore the pros and cons of small, medium, and large institutions in the process of selecting a right-fit college.

In addition to resources highlighted in the section above, the College Guidance Network offers a range of tools that educators can use to support the college process during a time of hybrid or virtual learning. [The resource](#) offers guidance for students, families, and educators focused on navigating the college process without the in-person supports that students typically rely upon.

APPLICATION AND FINANCIAL AID SUPPORT

As students enter their junior and senior year, educators can devote time during advisory periods or academic courses to support students with their college applications. The section below offers guidance on key areas of support. Educators can complete each of these strategies either virtually or in person.

- **Essay Writing:** Writing a strong college essay is an important part of the admissions process. Educators can devote time during junior and senior English classes for students to identify an essay topic, read model essays, and write (and proofread) their college essay. [This article from Edutopia](#) includes strategies for educators to support this process.
- **Financial Aid:** The process of collecting required documents and applying for financial aid is confusing, particularly for students who are the first in their family to go to college. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, many students lacked access to the in- and out-of-school supports they typically rely on to complete financial aid applications. As a result, federal student aid (FAFSA) applications declined significantly during the pandemic (Sparks, 2020).

Educators can devote time during remote or in-person advisory classes to support students with financial aid applications. They can also connect students to online resources, including [uAspire's student financial resources](#), Form Your Future's [FAFSA Guide](#), and College Board's [Big Future site](#). After students receive financial aid award notifications, it is important that counselors meet with students to compare each package. Many students will need help understanding the combination of grants, scholarships, loans, and work study offerings.

Undocumented students, who are not eligible for federal financial aid, will need individualized support to navigate the financial aid process. Boston Public Schools' [Unafraid Educators](#) maintains a resource site to support undocumented students in the college process. This includes a list of scholarships for which undocumented students are eligible.

- **Fee Waivers:** Students from low-income families can receive [fee waivers for SAT and ACT exams](#), as well as college applications. Counselors and advisors can assist students by providing eligibility information and helping students apply for fee waivers. Students who receive a fee waiver for the SAT are automatically eligible for application fee waivers at hundreds of participating colleges and universities.

PREPARING FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

Many middle and high schools lack adequate resources to provide students with the tailored college advising services they need. In such cases, educators can connect students and families with community-based college access organizations. Community-based organizations (CBOs) play a critical role in the college process, working with students and their families to identify right-fit colleges, supporting the application process, and helping students complete financial aid forms. Many CBOs also do deep work with parents and caretakers, helping them understand how they can support their child in the transition to college. Educators can use the [directory from NACACNET](#) to find college access programs.

CIVIC READINESS

This section explains how **quality civic education** creates space for young people to **knowledgeably** and **equitably** participate in public affairs.



Civic education teaches the "knowledge, skills and values believed necessary for democratic citizenship" (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Once a central component of the U.S. education system, the prevalence of civic education declined markedly between the 1960s and today. As school districts have shifted focus to spend more time on math and reading, students have received fewer opportunities to develop civics-specific skills.

As described in the [article from the Center for American Progress](#), a lack of civics instruction in schools has a profound impact on youth civic engagement, public trust in government, and young adult voter turnout. Too many young people lack opportunities that support them in gaining the skills and knowledge they need to participate in a democratic society. The goal of education is not just to prepare students for success in education and the workforce, but to produce informed citizens. Alongside their focus on preparing students for college and career pathways, schools should consider how to set students on a path toward postsecondary (and lifelong) civic engagement. The sections below offer strategies that educators can use to build civic readiness into existing school structures, both in person and virtually.

THE IMPACT ON COLLEGE AND CAREER SUCCESS

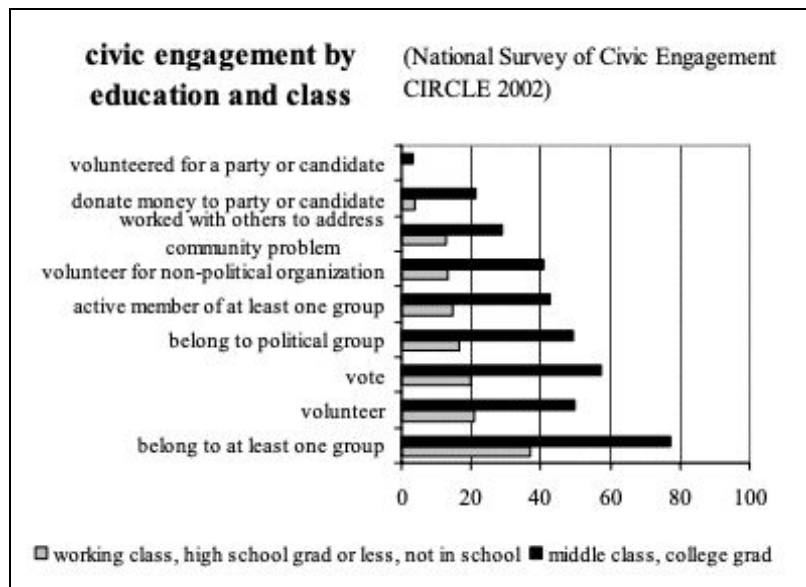
Civic engagement is positively associated with educational attainment and career success. By participating in civic education, youth gain knowledge of democratic processes and the skills

necessary to collaborate with people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. The connection between civic readiness and postsecondary success is as follows:

- **Self-Efficacy:** Learning about civics strengthens student motivation and helps youth develop a sense of self-efficacy. This influences academic and workplace success (Pope et al., 2011).
- **Workplace Competencies:** Civic education provides the opportunity for students to learn key skills necessary for workplace success. Employers report that they seek employees who possess strong interpersonal, teamwork, and problem-solving skills (Harvard Business Review, 2019).
- **College Success:** A foundational understanding of American history, political processes, international issues, and world culture is critical to college success (Department of Higher Education, 2014). Some entry-level college coursework can build off of this foundational K-12 knowledge.

The Civic Engagement Gap

There is a striking civic engagement gap between non-white, less affluent, and immigrant youth and their whiter, more affluent counterparts. Without quality civic education, marginalized students lose a powerful opportunity to build self-efficacy, rebuild trust with government, advocate for change, and advance a more equitable society. Click through the slides to learn about the civic engagement gap. The following graphs are from [Civic Engagement and the Disadvantaged: Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations](#).



The civic engagement gap reflects differences in socioeconomic status

Upper-middle-class children are being "groomed—through private investment and cultivation—to thrive in the competitive, knowledge-based economy that they will inherit" and will "enter adulthood as practiced citizens ready to participate in democracy and to collaborate with others" (Snellman et al., 2015). In contrast, their working-class peers are pushed

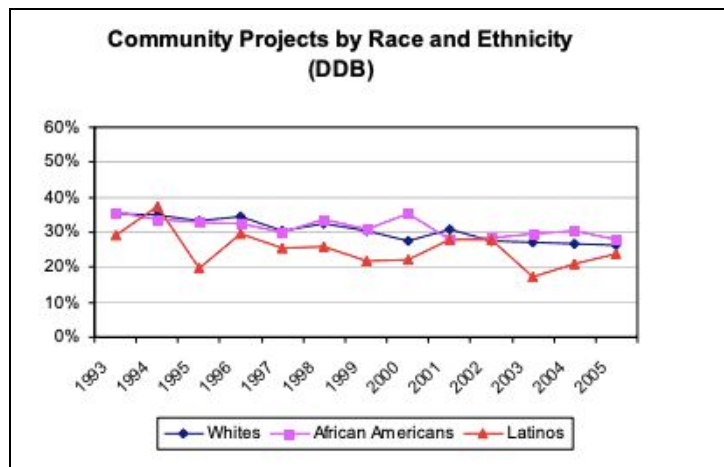
farther to the margins and farther from social mobility.

Social capital gets results

As youth progress into adulthood, those with higher incomes and more social capital are more likely to give money, contact public officials, work on community problems, and protest than their less affluent peers (Hyman & Levine, 2008). As a result, "public officials...are much more responsive to the privileged than to average citizens and the least affluent" (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2004). This sets up a cycle of ongoing inequity.

People of color are not disengaged

It is critical to note that the civic engagement gap represents a structural lack of opportunity, rather than a lack of interest in civic participation among marginalized citizens. As shown in the chart above, Black individuals are more likely than whites to report working on community projects or addressing community problems (Hyman & Levine, 2008).



Educators and school leaders play a critical role in addressing racial and socioeconomic gaps in civic knowledge and civic education. The strategies below include resources to embed equity-focused civics instruction across subject areas.

STRATEGIES TO ADVANCE CIVIC READINESS

The section below offers strategies that educators can use with students of all grade levels to advance civic readiness.

Discuss Racism and Inequity

To support postsecondary success for marginalized students, civic engagement practices in K-12 schools should be culturally relevant and center discussions on racism and inequity. These discussions are essential for all students to have as they reflect on their own identities and the contributions they can make to their school, community, and society. Educators can use the following strategies to address civic engagement gaps and empower students to push back against racism and inequity.

Teach the Language of Inequity

Students of color are aware of injustices in their communities long before the school identifies them. To prepare students for postsecondary success and democratic participation, educators must directly address the social forces that impact students' experiences by helping youth to develop critical consciousness (El-Amin et al., 2017). The [article from Kappa Online](#) provides guidance for educators to teach students the language of inequality, including helping students to understand and identify different forms of racism.

Examine Racism in the Media

As described in the Phi Delta Kappan article above, "students need to understand the depths of inequality and the myriad forces that sustain it" (El Amin et. al., 2017). Educators can provide this space by allocating time during class for students to reflect on portrayals of racial incidents in the news or other media, described in further detail in the article from the [Anti-Defamation League](#). Teaching Tolerance offers [additional resources](#) for educators to teach about the Black Lives Matter movement and relevant current events.

Encourage Students to Take Action

As students understand the systemic injustices that shape their own and others' experiences, many will have a desire to get involved. Educators can support students by teaching both historical and modern methods of activism and resistance. [The Generation Citizen link](#) provides a range of online resources that educators can use during remote learning. This includes assignments that encourage youth to reach out to local legislators or write an op-ed.

Partner with Community

By working with and in the community, educators can supplement in-class civic education and ensure that learning is relevant to students' lives. The following strategies provide guidance for civic learning in partnership with community members and organizations.

Civic Projects

Project-based learning is essential to a comprehensive civics education, as it pairs the theoretical with hands-on experience. Students can practice active citizenship by researching issues, exploring policy solutions, and identifying ways to impact their communities. For example, [Generation Citizen's Counteracting COVID-19 lesson plan](#) asks students to conduct participatory action research, comparing their city's response to COVID-19 to another city where a friend or family member lives. This lesson prepares youth to engage with their local government and is appropriate for middle and high school students.

Out-of-School Time Programs

Youth who participate in out-of-school time programming report "high levels of civic engagement and a commitment to getting involved within their communities, as assets and positive role models" (Payton, 2020). Many community-based organizations have an explicit focus on cultural learning, social-emotional learning, and community activism. Educators can support youth by connecting them with community-based programs. In addition, schools can explore partnerships with organizations such as [Generation Citizen](#), which offer action civics instruction in schools.

Community Service

Educators can establish partnerships with community organizations and local government to create service learning opportunities that are linked to the curriculum. For instance, service learning opportunities can include:

- Park/beach cleanups
- Spending time with nursing home residents
- Volunteering at a food pantry

During a time of distance learning, educators will likely need to modify service learning opportunities. Service learning opportunities during school closures could include:

- Launching a community-wide social media campaign to promote recycling
- Reading books to younger students via an online platform

As described in [this article from Edutopia](#), these opportunities are most effective when they are directly linked to students' classroom instruction. This can include opportunities for research and reflection related to the service learning experience.

Encourage Participation in Democratic Processes

Long before they are old enough to vote, students can begin preparing to participate in democracy. The section below provides strategies to support children and youth in understanding and engaging in democratic processes.

Incorporate Democratic Simulations

Students of all ages can learn about democratic processes by participating in simulation activities. Simulations of voting, trials, and legislative deliberation improve students' political knowledge and interest. [iCivics' Do I Have a Right? Simulation](#) offers one tool for students and educators.

Start a Student Government

[Student government](#) allows children as young as elementary school to develop civic skills. In addition to putting out a public call for student leaders, teachers should personally encourage students to participate. Educators can support students in making pitches to classmates via speeches or campaign letters. To ensure that as many students as possible can take part, certain roles can be held on a rotating basis. Children who participate in student government learn critical skills including communication, teamwork, public speaking, and compromise that empower them to effect change in their community.

Encourage Voter Participation

Though most high school students are not old enough to vote, educators play an importance role in building excitement for democratic participation. [iCivics' Cast Your Vote](#) provides an interactive, online mechanism for students to learn about the process of becoming an informed voter. Educators can pair this game with classroom discussions.

Teach about Elections

During a presidential election year, educators have the opportunity to support students' understanding of government through discussions of current events. [PBS LearningMedia](#) offers a range of resources for educators of all grade levels to teach about the 2020 election. The site offers activities that can be embedded in social studies, math, and English language arts instruction.

Incorporate Civics Across Subject Areas

The bullet points below explore practices and lessons that integrate civics education across subject areas. In addition to advancing students' civic readiness, these lessons help students understand the real-world application of academic material.

- **English:** Educators can integrate civics into English language arts classes by assigning readings, writing assignments, and research projects focused on civic issues. For example, [Teaching Tolerance's What is a Hate Crime? lesson](#) provides an opportunity for students to learn about legislation that addresses hate crimes while strengthening reading and writing skills.
- **Music & Arts:** Educators can integrate civics into the arts by teaching about how art can serve as a method of civic participation and a means to address civic issues. The [Teaching Tolerance resource](#) explores the connection between music and civic engagement.
- **Social Studies & Geography:** Social studies and geography units provide a powerful opportunity for students to learn about global migration and the reasons that lead people

around the world to move to another country. In fact, many social studies topics can be related to and offer a connection to current events. [The Facing History resource](#) offers guidance for educators.

- **Science:** Educators can integrate civics into science classes by teaching about the intersection of climate change and civic engagement. The [New York Times resource](#) provides an opportunity for students to develop civic skills while learning about the harm of climate change.
- **Math:** Educators can integrate civics into math classes by using election data to teach statistics including predictive modeling and polling. This [New York Times lesson](#) is appropriate for high school students.

THINKING BIGGER

EARLY COLLEGE

This section pushes readers to **think bigger** about postsecondary readiness by launching their own **early college program**.



WHY EARLY COLLEGE?

Too many students graduate from high school unprepared for the rigors of higher education. In Massachusetts, 22% of students require remedial coursework when they enroll in the state's public colleges or universities. These students are more likely than their peers to drop out of college before receiving a degree.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put many students' college plans in jeopardy, with a disproportionate effect on those from marginalized communities. Even students who do not require remedial coursework experience challenges in their quest to earn a college degree. Concerns about affordability and an inability to access campus resources, which have heightened during the pandemic, create barriers to student persistence in higher education.

When students have access to college courses while they are still in high school, they are more likely to enroll in and graduate from college. Rigorous research and evaluation of early college has proven significant postsecondary achievement gains in multiple states. In studies conducted by the [American Institutes for Research](#) on early college high school programs, findings demonstrated that "Early College students were more likely than their non-Early College peers to go to college and earn a college degree." Currently, Massachusetts has 23 officially designated early college programs serving 2,323 students, with partnerships spanning across 37 high schools and 19 higher education institutions. Though Massachusetts early college research is in its nascent stages, programs are already demonstrating a positive impact among postsecondary matriculation for early college students versus their matched peers.

Early college programs provide students with access to college-level rigor coupled with comprehensive support to ensure student success. In these programs, students receive both high school and college credit for the courses they complete. Below are key supports offered in early college programs. Each of these supports can be modified for an online environment.

- **Course Location:** In some cases, college professors visit the high school to teach courses onsite. However, research shows that early college programs are most effective when students leave their high school to participate in courses based on the college campus.
- **Campus Resources:** Early college students are full members of the college community. They have access to all campus resources including tutoring, medical care, libraries, and athletic facilities.
- **Program of Study:** In Massachusetts, most early college students participate in courses that are part of the Mass Transfer Block. Credits that students earn in these courses transfer to any state college or university.
- **Student Supports:** Early college students receive comprehensive support from individuals based at both the high school and the college. This includes advising to help students gain familiarity with college norms and adapt to course rigor. It also includes support to identify their career interests and select a program of study aligned to their goals.

Developing K-12 and higher education partnerships to create and maintain an early college program is not a short-term task. However, as COVID-19 has jeopardized many students' college plans, these programs provide a promising option to support students in pursuing their goals.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

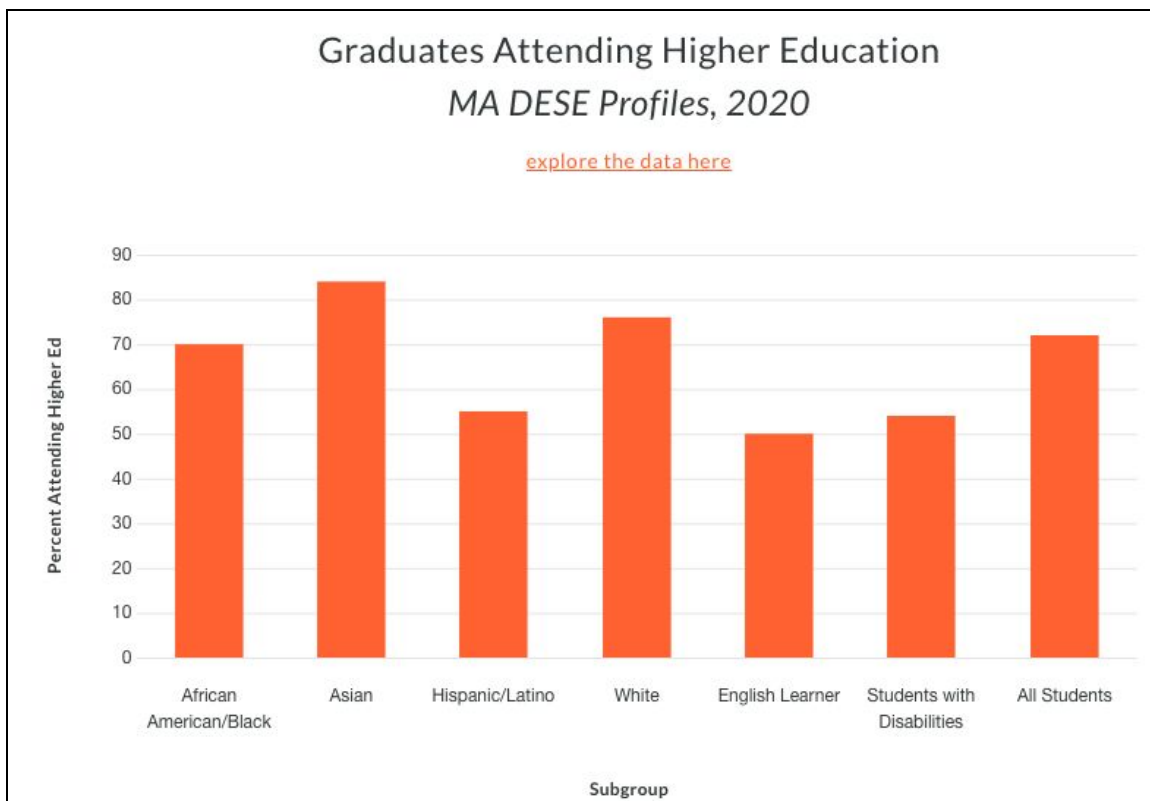
The following section explores the key components of early college programs. These principles were developed as part of the Commonwealth's Early College Initiative, which launched in 2017.

Equitable Access

Massachusetts data reveals that students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and English learners face significant barriers to enrolling in and graduating from higher education institutions. Effective early college programs are characterized by a laser-like focus on equity. This includes:

- Explicitly prioritizing student groups that are underrepresented in higher education in early college admissions processes
- Removing barriers, such as GPA requirements or program fees, that prevent students from accessing early college programs
- Utilizing culturally relevant recruitment strategies
- Providing special education and English learner supports within college coursework

The chart below, which shows the percentage of Massachusetts graduates attending higher education, displays the need for a core focus on equity in early college programs.



Academic Pathways

Early college programs are designed to bridge the transition between high school and postsecondary education. In order to meet this goal, K-12 and higher education partners must work together to:

- **Align Coursework:** Before starting courses, K-12 and higher education partners should meet to review curriculum and assess gaps. For example, if students participating in a college math course lack foundational knowledge necessary to access the material, this gap should be addressed within high school classes before enrolling students in the college course.
- **Establish Credit Expectations:** Early college participants should earn a minimum of 12 transferable college credits by the time they graduate from high school. K-12 and higher education partners should meet to map out a course of study. Ideally, this will include an opportunity for students to complete all foundational college math and English courses.
- **Ensure Rigor:** The rigor of early college courses should match that of a traditional college course. Higher education and high school leaders should regularly observe courses to monitor rigor and look for an emphasis on higher-order thinking skills.

Robust Student Support

What differentiates early college from typical postsecondary education is not the rigor of coursework. Rather, students receive comprehensive support as they adapt to the demands of college life. Effective early college programs include the following supports:

- An **advisory program** that prepares students for the cultural norms and expectations of college.
- Regular **family engagement**, including home visits and a family orientation.
- **College access resources**, including application support, financial aid support, and college advising.
- **Academic and attendance monitoring** that allows educators to intervene at the first sign a student is struggling.



Connections to Career

Early college programs provide opportunities for students to understand the employment landscape, explore career options, and begin a postsecondary education program aligned with

their career goals. Below are some strategies that Massachusetts early college programs use to connect learning with students' career interests.

- Many early college programs connect students with **internships**, allowing students to experience careers they may be interested in.
- Some early college programs include explicit **pathways aligned to high-demand careers**. For example, students may participate in an early college program focused on computer science or healthcare.
- When students are beginning an early college program, they benefit from the opportunity to participate in **industry site visits**. These visits provide a brief introduction to a range of different work environments, helping students visualize their options.

High-Quality Partnerships

Each of the strategies above is made possible by deep partnerships between K-12 and higher education institutions. In order to establish an effective early college program, leaders from both institutions must meet regularly to identify a common vision, establish early college procedures, troubleshoot challenges, and constantly iterate on the process of improving the early college program.

BUILDING AN EARLY COLLEGE PROGRAM

Districts and higher education partners who are looking to launch an early college program can view the [Rennie Center's Early College Blueprint](#) for detailed implementation guidance.

CAREER PATHWAY PROGRAMS

This section pushes readers to **think bigger** about implementing **career pathway programs** to support students' workforce goals.

WHAT IS A CAREER PATHWAY PROGRAM?

Career pathway programs, typically implemented at the high school level, provide educational programming that develops a student's interests and skills in industry-specific roles. The promise of earning workforce credentials in high school is a key driver of student interest in career pathway programs. Pathway programs provide a combination of aligned education and workforce training opportunities for youth.

In high school, career pathways can include **integrated career-technical education** with academic instruction, career exploration, and future planning. They may also include **career academies** that combine academic and vocational curriculum around specific career fields. Many also include **partnerships** with businesses and non-profits to connect youth with credentialed internships.

WHAT DOES A CAREER PATHWAYS PROGRAM LOOK LIKE?

[American Institutes for Research](#) provides the following examples of what a career pathway program in high school could look like:

"A high school student hoping to become an architect can begin building foundational knowledge with such courses as architectural design, construction management, and electrical technology along with traditional academic courses like English and biology. Her algebra and trigonometry courses would incorporate examples and applications related to architecture."

"A culinary arts student could receive hands-on learning in both his classroom and in a local restaurant to learn about cooking, nutrition, food safety and sanitation, and restaurant management."

The components of successful career pathway programs include:

- **Core Academic Skills** and the ability to apply those skills in the context of the workplace
- **Employability Skills**—critical thinking, time management, adaptability, and more
- **Technical, Job-Specific Skills** related to a specific career pathway, with on-the-job training that leads to industry certification

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) offers additional information about rigorous career pathway programs, explaining that "High-quality career pathways help more young adults bridge the gap between high school, advanced education and training programs, and high-skill, high-wage jobs in the career fields that matter to our state and regional economies."

Career pathways bridge the gap by:

- **Bringing purpose to learning** by helping students see studies as a gateway to real workforce opportunities and attracting students of all achievement levels and educational and career aspirations.
- **Teaching college-ready academics**, relevant technical knowledge and skills, and workplace know-how in the context of broad career fields.
- **Aligning with state and regional labor market opportunities**, because states and school districts work with business, industry, K-12, and postsecondary partners to design and build them.
- **Making business a full partner in education** and ensuring that employees have the foundational knowledge and skills needed to adapt to constantly changing workplace requirements. ([Read more here](#))

“Career pathways help high school students (and even some middle school students) gain secondary and postsecondary education, training, and support services while they acquire marketable skills, industry-recognized credentials, and eventually good jobs. Career pathway systems combine rigorous academics with workplace experience using the latest technologies.”

— American Institutes for Research

CAREER PATHWAY PROGRAMS IN MASSACHUSETTS

The section below provides examples of career pathway programs in Massachusetts schools and districts.

Innovation Pathways

Innovation Pathways are designed to give students coursework and experience in a specific high-demand industry, such as information technology, engineering, healthcare, life sciences and advanced manufacturing. These Pathways create strong partnerships with employers in order to expose students to career options and help them develop knowledge and skills related to their chosen field of study before they graduate high school.

Currently, [36 schools in Massachusetts](#) have Innovation Pathways designations, including:

- Everett High School: Manufacturing, Health Care and Social Assistance, Business
- Worcester High Schools (Doherty Memorial High School, Burncoat High School, North High School, South High School, Claremont Academy, and University Park Campus School): Health Care and Social Assistance, Information, Environmental and Life Sciences, Manufacturing, Business and Finance
- Lowell High School: Health Care and Social Assistance, Environmental and Life Sciences
- Lawrence High School: Business and Finance, Health Care and Social Assistance

Kennedy Academy for Health Careers

The [Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers \(EMK\)](#) is a college preparatory school based in Boston that serves students interested in pursuing careers related to healthcare. EMK students have the opportunity to participate in internships at local hospitals and earn a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) credential by their high school graduation.

Dearborn STEM Early College Academy

Dearborn STEM Academy partners with local higher education institutions and employers to provide students with rigorous career preparation. School leaders note, "We are creating a model STEM Early College Academy with three robust career pathways in computer science, engineering, and health and life sciences. We seek to provide a rigorous, high-quality STEM education that ensures that students are not only college ready, but also ready for careers." [More information is available here.](#)

Boston Day and Evening Academy

[Boston Day and Evening Academy](#) offers 11-week curriculum modules rather than yearlong courses, combined with individualized student planning and extensive social-emotional supports. They "offer Early College and Career pathways...that link our students to a partner organization with expertise in a particular career and with a strong record for job placement." The school's goal is to graduate students who are prepared for a career or postsecondary education in a field of interest.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS IN STARTING CAREER PATHWAY PROGRAMS

In Massachusetts, Innovation Pathways provide students with experience and exposure to career opportunities. Local education agencies and institutions of higher education can obtain formal designation from DESE, as well as grant funding for the program.

The section below outlines key considerations for districts interested in starting a career pathway program. For a detailed list of considerations, refer to the [state criteria](#) for innovation pathways.

Identify a Pathway Focus

Career pathways programs that lead to a workplace credential should be designed around high-demand careers that are of interest to students. Most schools start by developing just one pathway program, and gradually expand to include additional options.

Selecting a Pathway Focus

Which pathway is appropriate for your community? Below are steps to take to learn how to decide the correct pathway.

1. Connect with your Local Workforce Board

MassHire workforce boards are designed to align education and workforce development programming with local labor market needs. Workforce boards serve as critical partners in developing career pathway programs. The [link from Mass.gov](#) provides contact information for local workforce boards.

2. Explore Labor Market Data

Labor market data enables educators to gain a sense of job projections and salary estimates as they identify appropriate pathway options. The process of identifying an appropriate industry sector will be most effective if students, families, and community partners are involved in the selection process. Educators can use the [Occupational Outlook tool](#) to engage stakeholders in a decision-making process.

DESE also offers guidance on high-growth Massachusetts sectors for districts applying for Innovation Pathway Designation. In recent years, eligible sectors have included:

- Business and finance
- Environmental and life sciences
- Manufacturing
- Information
- Health care and social assistance

3. Develop Employer Partnerships

Upon selecting an industry sector, districts must [establish partnerships](#) with local employers. Employers are critical partners, providing career immersion, career awareness, and internship experience for youth.

Regardless of the industry sector that district teams choose, it should have broad applicability to a range of career options. In the classroom, educators can support students by providing opportunities for them to explore the range of ways they can apply their sector-specific knowledge in the workforce.

Develop a Robust Advising Plan



There are a multitude of ways that students can apply industry-specific knowledge in preparing for careers. Some students may choose to apply their credential and enter directly into the workforce. Others will strive for roles that require college or graduate-level education. Depending on students' goals, many will benefit from a certificate, associate degree, bachelor's degree, or graduate degree.

As described in the *Career Exploration* section of this guide, individualized learning plans are a valuable tool that students can use to identify high school courses, higher education options, and internship programs that align with their career goals. To support students in developing quality individualized learning plans, educators should provide clear information about the types of jobs available to students with various levels of postsecondary education.

High School Degree

Regardless of desired career path, most students benefit from some form of postsecondary education or training. Research shows that workers without a postsecondary degree or credential are most at risk of losing jobs due to automation and new technology in the next decade (Selyukh, 2019).

However, there are good jobs available to students who graduate with a high school diploma. The [Good Jobs Project](#) describes industries and occupations that can offer a family-sustaining wage for high school graduates, including health services, manufacturing, construction, information, and retail trades. Students who earn a meaningful workplace credential during high school are best positioned for these jobs. Career pathway programs provide the opportunity for students to earn such credentials.

Associate Degree

Certificate and associate degree programs provide viable and accessible pathways to economic opportunity. The "middle-skills pathway," which represents credentials between a high school diploma and a bachelor's degree, makes up half of enrolled postsecondary students. These students are more diverse in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and age than those in bachelor's degree programs.

Certificates provide students with career-specific knowledge and skills for middle-skill jobs in fields like health, technology, and public services. Not all certificate and associate degree programs have the same value and earnings potential. Certificate and associate degree holders in engineering tend to make the highest salaries. The [report from CEW Georgetown](#) offers key findings on the labor-market value of associate degrees and certificate programs.

Bachelor's Degree

Bachelor's degrees are becoming increasingly necessary to access entry-level jobs in fields like business, finance, engineering, and technology. While pursuing a bachelor's degree, students typically complete both general and major-specific coursework to build skills related to their field of interest.

Bachelor's degrees meet the minimum education requirement for many high-paying roles. The [guide from The Best Schools](#) provides information on what a bachelor's degree is and jobs that students can get upon earning a bachelor's degree.

Align Career Pathways with High School Coursework

Successful career pathway programs integrate industry-specific learning with high school coursework. They also provide the core academic foundation that students need to succeed in the workplace. When participating in an aligned career pathway program, students should have ample opportunities to develop transferable skills such as teamwork and communication. The section below offers key considerations in developing an aligned pathway for high school students.

Make Connections Across Subject Areas

Students benefit when they see the real-world applicability of their core academic content. Courses such as English, math, and science can be bolstered to include industry-applicable content. For example, math classes can incorporate construction-based calculations and word problems, art classes can incorporate architectural design, and science classes can dive into medical terminology. This [article from the Hechinger Report](#) provides an example of how one high school blends academic and career/technical learning. Though this is not a short-term solution, it represents a model that schools can aspire towards.

Engage Students in Experiential Learning

In addition to connecting students with industry-relevant internships, educators can explore opportunities to create student jobs within the school community. The [video from Edutopia](#) describes how one high school offers student-led technology support, allowing students to develop technical skills while providing a meaningful service to the

community. Burlington High School operates a [similar program](#). Such a strategy could be adapted in a time of virtual or hybrid learning.

Define the End Goal

Some career pathway programs provide the opportunity for students to earn a recognized industry credential during high school. This could include a medical assistant or web development certificate, among many other options. Other programs provide students with the opportunity to enroll in college courses in a field of interest, making progress towards an associate or bachelor's degree. For example, students working towards an associate degree in human services may take the following college courses during high school:

- Introduction to Human Services
- College Writing
- Introduction to Psychology
- Child Growth and Development

In designing a career pathway program, it is critical that program leaders clearly define the end goal for participating students. This allows college and industry partners to map out an appropriate sequence of study. An example sequence of career-related and core academic coursework for a Health Sciences pathway is included in the table below:

Category	9th Grade	10th Grade	11th Grade	12th Grade
Academic	Biology	Chemistry	Psychology	AP Biology
Technical	Introduction to Healthcare	Medical Terminology	Health Care Observation	Nursing Assistant Internship
Elective	Sociology	World Language	Health Care Observation	Nursing Assistant Internship

Launching a career pathway program represents a significant investment of time for educators and school leaders. The *Going Deeper* section of this guide includes additional resources for getting started.

TAKE ACTION

ACTION STEPS

This section includes a **list of action steps** for school leaders and educators as they develop and enhance postsecondary readiness supports.



FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

To Do Now:

The following actions can be implemented immediately, or early on in the school year, to support postsecondary readiness efforts.

- ❑ **Survey high school students** about the impact of COVID on their postsecondary plans. This will enable school-based staff to identify supports that are relevant to your community's unique needs.
- ❑ **Ensure students have access to school counselors** during virtual learning. Ask counselors to reach out to each student to schedule a virtual appointment.
- ❑ Share **free career exploration lessons and curricula** with educators. Ask educators to embed career exploration lessons in virtual or in-person advisory periods. Examples are included in the Career Exploration section of this guide.

- ❑ Ensure educators are equipped to **teach employability skills through a racial equity lens**. Consider facilitating a staff-wide conversation wherein educators interrogate connections between topics such as "professionalism" and white, Eurocentric workplace norms. In brainstorming ways to address this equity concern, share the following [Diverse Education resource](#) with educators. Though it is written with a higher education audience in mind, it applies to K-12 instruction as well.
- ❑ Provide educators and school counselors with **online college advising and exploration resources**. Ensure all students have access to college counseling and application support during virtual or hybrid learning. Begin by sharing resources listed in the *College Advising* section of this guide.

To Do Later:

The following long-term and more resource-intensive actions will support school and district efforts to deepen postsecondary readiness offerings.

- ❑ Develop **community partnerships** to engage students in **experiential career preparation**. Consider getting started with a lighter-lift strategy, such as a series of job shadow days with local employers for middle and high school students.
- ❑ Consider implementing student-led **Individualized Learning Plans**. Convene a small team of stakeholders to research the benefits of ILPs and determine if this strategy is appropriate for your school context.
- ❑ Connect with **community-based organizations to develop a web of college access supports** for students. Schedule quarterly meetings with college access providers to determine any programming gaps and identify improvements.
- ❑ Provide **professional learning** for educators on the importance of **civic learning across content areas**. Include strategies that educators can use to embed civics instruction in English, math, history, science, arts, and physical education courses.
- ❑ Connect with community-based organizations to identify curriculum-related **service learning projects** for students. Equip educators with classroom-based reflection activities related to the service learning experience.
- ❑ Form a **student government**. Ask educators to personally encourage students to participate.
- ❑ Gather a team of school- and community-based stakeholders to explore the potential of **early college**. Begin by reviewing the Rennie Center's [Early College Blueprint](#).
- ❑ Gather a team of school- and community-based stakeholders to explore the potential of an **Innovation Pathway program**. Begin by scheduling a meeting with your [local MassHire workforce board](#) to discuss program development.

FOR EDUCATORS AND SCHOOL COUNSELORS

- ❑ School Counselors: **Schedule individual appointments with students** during remote learning. Consider using a free tool such as **Calendly** to manage individual appointments. Ensure that every senior who needs it receives individualized support completing college financial aid applications. Provide students with information on application fee waivers.



- ❑ For middle and high school students, **embed career exploration lessons** into virtual or in-person advisory periods. Consider using a free resource such as [Roadtrip Nation](#), which allows each student to access unique resources based upon their goals and passions.
- ❑ Incorporate opportunities for students to **build 21st century skills**, such as collaboration and communication, in daily instruction. Educators can incorporate a formal curriculum, such as [Possible Futures](#), into advisory periods. In addition, teachers can incorporate skill-building activities in core subject areas by providing opportunities for students to work collaboratively, practice oral and written communication, etc.
- ❑ Engage students in **project-based, career-oriented learning**. Begin by exploring [industry-specific performance tasks](#) from America Achieves.
- ❑ Provide opportunities for students to **reframe mistakes as learning opportunities**. Consider incorporating the following [Edutopia resources](#) into instruction.
- ❑ Devote time in advisory, elective, or core instructional periods for students to **explore college options**. Host a virtual alumni panel, during which former students share their college experiences.
- ❑ As a homework assignment, ask students to complete 3 [virtual college tours](#). Require students to select schools of different sizes and locations to gain a sense of the range of options available. Provide time for individual and group reflection, wherein students consider their preferences related to size, location, academic program offerings, extracurricular activities, student demographic makeup, etc.
- ❑ During junior or senior year English courses, plan lessons focused on [selecting a college essay topic](#), drafting the essay, requesting peer feedback, and proofreading.
- ❑ Develop students' civic mindsets by teaching the [language of inequity](#). Provide [classroom assignments](#) wherein students **examine the impact of racism and inequity** in their communities.

- ❑ **Incorporate project-based civics learning** into classroom instruction. For example, [Generation Citizen's Countering COVID lesson plan](#) provides a timely action research project for middle and high school students.
- ❑ **Develop students' understanding of democracy and government** by teaching about the [2020 Presidential Election](#). Build excitement for voter participation by introducing students to iCivics' [Cast Your Vote](#) game.
- ❑ **Embed civics instruction** in other subject areas. For example, a high school math teacher could use election and polling data to teach statistics.

GOING DEEPER

This section contains resources for deeper learning on postsecondary readiness.

GOING DEEPER ON CAREER EXPLORATION, CAREER READINESS, AND CAREER PATHWAYS

- This [report from the Rennie Center](#) describes the RAMP program at Wentworth Institute of Technology, which provides an innovative and localized approach to project-based learning, community partnerships, and mentoring to bridge the gap between high school and college.
- These [Career Pathways Modules](#) from the American Institutes for Research are intended to help state education agency staff design, implement, and evaluate a career pathways system. Each chapter includes a facilitator’s guide, slide presentation, and activity handouts.
- Pathways to Adult Success offers guidance on [How to Develop Viable Career Pathways within Middle and High School Programs](#) that includes information on how to get started, exemplars in practice, and resources for further reading.

GOING DEEPER ON COLLEGE ADVISING AND EARLY COLLEGE

- [This Time, With Feeling: Integrating Social and Emotional Development and College- and Career-Readiness Standards](#) from the Aspen Institute presents an approach to defining social and emotional development (SED) and the connection between college- and career-readiness standards and SED.
- [From Aspirations to Action: Increasing Postsecondary Readiness for Underrepresented Students from the Smaller Learning Communities Program](#) is a resource toolkit that includes tools and rubrics for assessing college readiness; research and data that document successful practices; and programs that increase aspirations, attainment, or guidance.
- Jobs for the Future has been a leading purveyor of early college for over 15 years, and their [Early College Expansion Initiatives](#) and resources on the impact of early college are listed on their linked website.

GOING DEEPER ON CIVIC READINESS

- Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life and the [Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement](#) offers many ways to explore equitable K-12 civic learning. Start [here](#) or explore data on youth voting and civic engagement in America [here](#).

- The Conversation writes about [How to reach young voters when they're stuck at home](#) in an election year and amid a global pandemic.
- Brookings unpacks [The need for civic education in 21st-century schools](#), to build an understanding of how schools can directly provide opportunities for civic engagement and equip young people with 21st-century skills.

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