

CREATING STRONG TRANSITIONS FROM HIGH SCHOOL THROUGH COLLEGE:

A PROGRESS REPORT ON REDESIGNING SENIOR YEAR

AT A GLANCE

This resource guide presents working models of successful employer engagement and lessons for securing and sustaining partnerships with employers. It presents a continuum that gives examples of activities associated with each level of employer engagement.

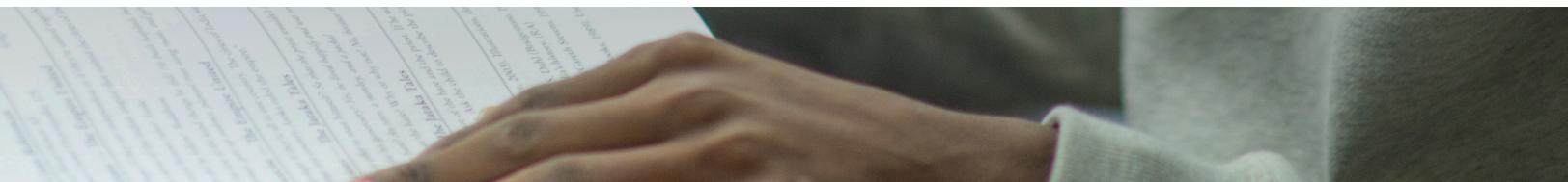
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**BUILDING A
FUTURE
THAT WORKS.**



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for our partnerships with the Baytown, Oak Ridge, and Zanesville colleges and school districts described in this brief. Many individuals in these locales contributed to the work—too many to name here—but it is important for us to acknowledge how much we have learned from all of the leaders of every one of the school districts, high schools, and colleges that participated. They were generous with us and each other in the time they spent on the co-design, co-delivery, and co-validation of new routes to college completion for their students. And their passion for seeing more of their students succeed is unflagging.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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INTRODUCTION

Too many young people who start college falter and never finish. This happens frequently in their first year¹. It is common among students who attend broad-access public institutions, typically two- and four-year colleges in their regions. This large group includes many students from low-income backgrounds, who often are the first person in their families to pursue higher education, and many who are required to take remedial courses before entering credit-bearing, college-level courses².

The fault lies not with students but with the failure of our K-12 and postsecondary systems of education to build better bridges between the two sectors. At high school graduation, students exit a compulsory secondary education where completion is a primary aim. They are left on their own to choose whether to continue in a voluntary postsecondary system, where student success based on one's ability to "sink or swim" has traditionally been viewed as normal. State K-12 curriculum, standards, and accountability rules have been increasingly designed to better prepare high school graduates for college and career readiness, and more colleges are trying strategies to support incoming student success. But the structure of our education systems still presumes that the job of high schools ends upon the completion of 12th grade and that the job of colleges starts when students enroll.

However rational on its face, this division of responsibilities creates a chasm for students making the leap from high school to college, especially for low-income youth. It is also a serious barrier to optimizing the flow of talent into highly skilled jobs that more and more require postsecondary credentials.

Often, education commentators have pointed to the problem of a “wasted” high school senior year as a culprit for these challenges³. For example, seniors take too many elective courses to complete graduation requirements even as too many end up in remedial courses in college the following fall. We argue that while improving senior year is a necessary strategy, it is an incomplete solution. Rather, postsecondary institutions must work as partners with high schools to help students build momentum for college during the transition period from the beginning of 12th grade through the end of freshman year (see box, “*About this Series*”).⁴

JFF set out a little over a year ago to create such models for bridging the secondary-postsecondary divide, developing strategies for high schools and colleges to build paths from the 12th grade through critical milestones of success in the first year of college. These partnerships of school districts and community colleges in Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas hold the belief that their institutions share responsibility for supporting students whom they so often both serve from the same community within a few months’ time. They have a common goal to ensure that every high school student completes key nonremedial college courses by the time they make the

transition from 12th grade into the first year of college. And they are advancing these common interests through strategies *co-designed* by the partners, such as new courses and support systems, and *co-delivered* by shared staff and other resources. They also are *co-validating* these experiences as part of high school graduation requirements and through college credit or guarantee of placement in nonremedial, college-level courses (see box, “*Three Guiding Principles*”).

Their collective work, which JFF has supported with strategic guidance and facilitation of strategic planning, is still in the formative stages. Even at this point, it is impressive and important work that holds lessons for K-12 and college educators and policymakers seeking to improve rates of postsecondary success for low-income youth.

This report is a snapshot in time of the ongoing efforts in each of these communities, but we believe it is nevertheless instructive for their progress so far and plans for the future. The paper begins with a brief description of how we recruited strong partners and what binds and distinguishes each. It continues with a description of the unique features of strategies they are co-creating and challenges they have encountered. The

report concludes with lessons JFF has learned in testing our hypothesis about how to create stronger transitions from the end of high school through the first year of college.

THREE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

FOR SECONDARY-POSTSECONDARY PARTNERSHIPS THAT INCREASE COLLEGE SUCCESS

Co-Design

Together deciding on and designing courses, curricular pathways, and support systems—as well as professional development opportunities and data platforms—that impact what and how students learn.

Co-Delivery

Sharing and coordinating faculty and staff, facilities, and other resources to carry out the co-designed learning experiences and supports.

Co-Validation

Accepting agreed-upon assessments, successful completion of performance tasks and experiences, and other indicators of learning as evidence of proficiency—including for placement in credit-bearing, college-level courses.

ABOUT THE SERIES

READY OR NOT: IT'S TIME TO RETHINK THE 12TH GRADE

This paper concludes a [series](#) that takes on one of the most pressing problems of our time—how to prepare many more young people, especially in underserved communities, to succeed in college and careers. With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, JFF began this work with research of innovative strategies that redesign the 12th grade in order to increase college entry and completion. Previous papers outlined evidence-based principles of secondary-postsecondary partnerships, practice, and policy that can drive a resurgent effort to rethink the transition from high school to college. This paper highlights efforts to put those principles into practice (see “*Three Guiding Principles*”).



SELECTING PARTNERS

Because K-12 school systems and public colleges operate separately with no mandates and few incentives for working together, we needed to find local partners that already possessed enlightened self-interest about joining forces to promote student success. We also wanted to make sure that they were interested in receiving our strategic guidance to enhance these efforts. As such, we sought sites that met the following four criteria:

PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL NETWORKS FOCUSED ON IMPROVING POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

We reasoned that membership in such networks was indicative of a commitment to a range of strategies including cross-sector alignment and partnerships. JFF's Postsecondary State Policy and Student Success Centers networks, for example, are focused on supporting the development of accelerated pathways through community college and strengthening policies to help more students graduate with a high-value credential.⁵

Similarly, JFF's Pathways to Prosperity Network, a partnership with the Harvard Graduate School of Education, works with education and industry leaders to build systems of career pathways linking high school, work, and community college, to increase the number of youth who complete high school and attain a postsecondary credential with labor market value.⁶

We found each of our partners through one of these networks; they are also all involved in other postsecondary improvement networks such as Achieving the Dream.⁷

A HISTORY OF HIGH SCHOOL-COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS

We believed our assistance would be most effective for college and high school staff who saw it as helping them to accelerate and deepen efforts they were already motivated to undertake without us. Zanesville State College and Zanesville City Schools in Ohio, for example, already offered college courses for dual credit to high school students. They wanted to strengthen and expand these efforts under the state's College Credit Plus program. They also wanted to align other efforts each had underway to support student success, such as integrated advising systems that use student-level progress data to inform the college's academic support services and the creation of pathways to STEM careers.

Lee College and Goose Creek Independent School District (ISD) were partners in a regional consortium on the Gulf Coast of Texas that had goals to ensure that every 12th grader had a post-graduation plan, opportunities to participate in dual credit coursework, and access to advising and curricula that bridged into postsecondary education. Oak Ridge Public Schools and Roane State Community College were planning to create a middle college (which is similar to an early college) on the Roane State campus focused on technical careers, and they wanted to build on this budding partnership.

COMMITMENT OF STAFF TIME TO STRATEGIC PLANNING, IMPLEMENTATION, AND COMMUNICATION

Creating effective partnerships requires significant time, mutual trust, and joint decision making. Indeed, the work of co-design, co-delivery, and co-validation to improve transitions between high school and college has involved significant investments of intellectual power from a long list of secondary and postsecondary leaders: high school principals, district superintendents, high school and college counselors, heads of curriculum and instruction, college provosts, college presidents and vice presidents, and district-college liaisons. Our partners have demonstrated a commitment to each other and to their work. They also stay in touch with state officials who can help them navigate policy issues, inform future policymaking, and share emerging lessons with other districts and colleges.

SERVING COMMUNITIES WITH DIVERSE POPULATIONS

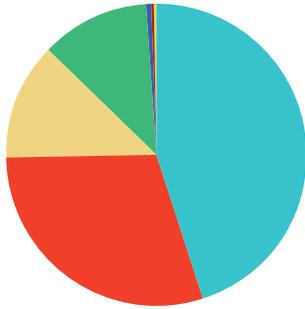
We knew this work would be most useful if we supported partnerships that were committed to supporting high school and college success for all students, especially traditionally underserved populations. Experience told us that everyone would learn more by understanding how such efforts might vary by local context.

The three partnerships represent an interesting array of communities. Zane State College and Zanesville City Schools, in Appalachian Ohio, serve a largely white and low-income population. Lee College and Goose Creek ISD, in suburban Houston, serve a racially diverse community of largely Latino, white, and black students. Roane State Community College and Oak Ridge Schools are in a Tennessee community that once housed the Manhattan Project and is now undergoing demographic shifts that are increasing the diversity of its students.

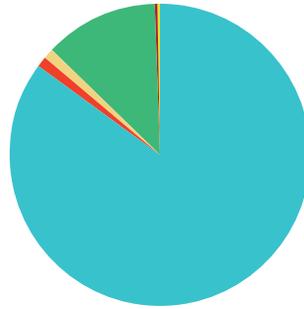


COMPARING STUDENT POPULATIONS IN DISTRICTS REDESIGNING 12TH GRADE

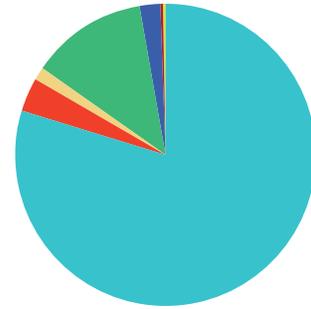
	Goose Creek Independent School District, Texas	Zanesville City Schools, Ohio	Oak Ridge, Tennessee
Schools	30	6	8
High Schools	5	1	1
Low-Income Population*	57%	82%	29%**
Total Population Under 18	25,788	7,236	5,515
Population of 2 or More Races	989	357	237



GOOSE CREEK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, TEXAS



ZANESVILLE CITY SCHOOLS, OHIO



OAK RIDGE, TENNESSEE

- White
- Hispanic/Latino
- Hawaii/Pacific Islander
- Black/African American
- Asian
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Other

Source: School year 2015-16 data from National Center for Education Statistics, unless otherwise noted.⁸

** The proportion of students whose family incomes qualify them for federally subsidized free or reduced-price lunches. It is a common proxy for the number of low-income students in a school district.*

*** Data on students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch not available. About 29 percent of the district's students are "economically disadvantaged," according to the state "Report Card" for the 2015-16 school year.*

DIVERSE COMMUNITIES, SHARED OBJECTIVES

Each partnership serves a unique population and used strategies that grew out of the needs of its community. Yet all three shared a common set of objectives. Their work to redesign the 12th grade included these goals:

- To strengthen high school-college partnerships to ensure that the high school experience is better aligned with the aim of college and career readiness for all students.
- To design and develop high school-to-college transition experiences tailored to student needs, within a larger strategic plan that supports all 12th graders to complete key nonremedial college courses by high school graduation or during the first year of college.
- To co-design, co-deliver, and co-validate at least one transition experience, such as a college success course or a dual credit course sequence, for implementation by the spring of 2018.
- To engage state policy leaders to share 12th-grade redesign lessons within their states and to identify policy needs for supporting similar work.

All three partnerships pursued these objectives in their own way but with similarly notable progress. We highlight here examples of how each site has been striving toward meeting their shared objectives, with a unique focus.

1. Strengthening a Partnership, Piloting a Pathway, Attracting State Attention

The superintendent of Zanesville City Schools and the president of Zane State College and their teams have a zeal about the vital role their institutions play in the fabric of their community, a small, hilly city at the edge of Appalachia. They see the college and career success of their students as an important measure of meeting their mission.

Part of their challenge is to build a postsecondary-going culture among students and parents. Many students don't view themselves as college material or understand the importance for their career prospects of continuing education and training beyond high school. Many parents did not attend college themselves and they also lack that understanding.

For many years, Zanesville schools and Zane State College have separately been pursuing similar goals. Zanesville High School has been steadily expanding Advanced Placement (AP) options and STEM courses, through the national nonprofit Project Lead the Way, to increase college readiness rates. Meanwhile, Zane State College has been an innovator nationally in implementing student success strategies, such as integrated advising, corequisite coursework, pathways to well-paying middle-skill STEM careers, and the expansion of dual enrollment under the state's College Credit Plus policy.⁹

Both the district and the college saw the 12th-grade redesign objectives as an opportunity to align and enhance their efforts by working in closer partnership. At the onset of the effort, they noted a half-mile path that serves as a shortcut between the high school and college campuses, and explained they wanted to create a metaphoric path from senior year to college that every 12th grader knows through experience.

WHAT THEY'VE DONE

One of the strategies the college and district pursued in the first year of the pilot was to take stock of all the college readiness and success programming they had been developing independently. The key step was to understand how the disparate approaches could merge into pathways and experiences reaching every 12th grader. For example, dual credit and AP courses were already options for seniors demonstrating college readiness based on ACT or ACCUPLACER test scores.

Yet unprepared seniors had no way to help them prepare for college courses while in high school, even as the college had been developing strategies for their own underprepared first-year students.

Realizing that high school seniors had an opportunity to avoid remediation in

college, the partners developed a strategy to fill the gap. For high school students who scored within a few points of the college readiness level on assessments (i.e., those who were “near ready”), they created a program in the fall of 2017 enabling completion of prerequisite courses for gateway college-level math and English in the first semester of 12th grade. In the second semester, the students would take the gateway math and English courses and other courses in a program of study for college credit before graduating high school. For students with more ground to make up, the partners planned to create a second route, in the fall of 2018. As seniors, the students would complete prerequisite requirements for college-level work by the end of the school year, earn college credit the summer after graduation, and, ideally, enter college without the need for remediation.

The partners also saw a critical need for non-academic support systems for all seniors, especially given that so many would be the first in their families to go to college and knew little about how to navigate higher education. So, starting with the “near ready” group of students, they began to implement a variety of college knowledge and college success programs: parent engagement sessions focused on taking the steps needed to

enter into and finance college, corequisite support classes for high school students taking college courses, mentoring and tutoring for seniors by Zane State College faculty, and career planning and advising.

PROGRESS SO FAR

The state of Ohio has taken a keen interest in the plans and progress of the Zanesville partnership. State leaders see the effort's potential to inform other colleges and school districts trying to increase the number of underserved high school students who can qualify for and take advantage of the state's College Credit Plus dual enrollment program. The program expanded access to college courses for high school students by offering 12 credits at no cost to families. But they have still seen relatively low participation from low-income youth because fewer qualify for the courses. The state's K-12 and higher education agencies are communicating with other districts and colleges about Zanesville's efforts. And to support its efforts, the state invited the college to apply for a waiver that would enable high school students in the pilot to use alternatives to the ACCUPLACER test in order to qualify for college-level courses.

The pilot has shown promising early results: 24 out of 25 students earned a C or better in their first semester prerequisite

math and English courses, as well as in a college success course. Further, all participating students completed the FAFSA federal financial aid form, college applications for school year 2018-19, and career and postsecondary plans. Recently, participating students earned mid-term grades for their second semester college-level courses: 100 percent (24 students total) are earning a C or better in English, 80 percent are earning a C or better in math, and 89 percent are earning a C or better in a college-level course within their selected major. Ongoing student data collection by the Zane State / Zanesville High School faculty liaison has allowed her to identify struggling students and provide them with extensive academic tutoring.

2. Creating a Holistic Strategic Plan for the High School-to-College Transition

Lee College and Goose Creek ISD's surroundings are marked by oil and petrochemical refineries that are among the largest in the country. The community's grit was evident as it bounced back from Hurricane Harvey which struck Houston and its gulf coast neighbors, including Baytown, in 2017. A partnering school principal whose personal property sustained substantial damage in the flooding was back at school within just a couple of weeks after the hurricane, with a continued focus on redesigning the senior year at her high school. Lee College's team also kept pace. Educators from both institutions cited dedication to meeting the significant needs of the region's students as their inspiration for returning so soon.

The college and Goose Creek, the sole independent school district within the college's taxing district, had worked together on college readiness strategies prior to 2016. (Under state law, being part of the taxing district entitles residents to reduced tuition at the college and certain services.) When JFF approached Lee College that year about redesigning the high school-to-college transition, the college's high school liaison said it was perfect timing because the college was ready to take conversations in Goose Creek and other districts to "the next level." Specifically, college leaders wanted to make a shift in mindset and practice—moving from the goal of students being prepared for college by the end of high school to having students "*doing* some college" before graduation.

Their efforts came at a fortuitous time in Texas, which had changed its high school graduation requirements a few years earlier,

stipulating that all graduates earn a career endorsement and no longer mandating that every student take Algebra II, a course long seen as a gatekeeper to college. Along with policies opening up access to dual credit for younger students, this created more flexibility for high schools to create new pathways for students into college. But the partnership still had to ensure that students were actually prepared to succeed in math and other key college-level coursework.

WHAT THEY'VE DONE

Goose Creek ISD and Lee College had started taking on this challenge through efforts such as curriculum alignment and the implementation of Transition to College Mathematics, a college preparatory math course that serves seniors who have not yet demonstrated college readiness in mathematics. Transition to College Mathematics, which was developed by the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin, emphasizes necessary content to prepare students for all entry-level mathematics courses.¹⁰ But the partners were interested in designing a more comprehensive strategy. They wanted to serve not only every 12th grader in the district's comprehensive high school, Goose Creek Memorial, but also all of the students in its alternative high school. The

alternative-program students are older than most high school seniors and don't yet have enough credits to graduate. The partners wanted to encourage all of these young people to lift their aspirations and shift their preparation for college toward a meaningful career, including by taking some college courses while in high school.

At the alternative high school, the partners developed a pilot pathway focused on students with high and consistent attendance who scored at the first level of developmental education in reading and writing on college placement tests. The pathway for these students includes:

- Participation in an eight-week college success course that bears college credit.
- Customized college and career exploration activities in which students identify career interests and embark on dual credit pathways and college immersion activities based on career clusters.
- Engagement in college campus activities, such as Student Orientation Week, Celebrate College Week, and the Career Fair.
- Student-ambassador training in which students serve as peer mentors to inspire a college and career readiness culture at their high school.
- The strategies the partners developed

for the comprehensive high school do not only focus on 12th grade but also back map to earlier grade levels so that more seniors are ready for and engaged in college courses and are moving toward a career.

Partnership activities at Goose Creek Memorial High School include:

- Enrolling an increasing number of seniors who are not college ready in Dana Center-developed college preparatory math and Lee College-developed college prep English courses. (Readiness is determined by state standardized tests known as the Texas Success Initiative Assessment, end-of course exams, college admission tests like the ACT and SAT.)
- Engaging “not ready” students in grades 9 through 12 in existing Lee College student support services, such as the Puente Project (a mentoring program that supports underrepresented high school students’ college enrollment and preparation) and ACCUPLACER preparation support workshops.
- Early college placement assessment starting in eighth grade to identify and engage dual-enrollment-eligible students and students in need of early academic acceleration support.

- Increasing student dual credit participation, starting in the ninth grade, within so-called “meta-major courses,” which are part of a cluster of college courses aligned to broad career interests that ensure that students are making progress toward a high-value college credential.
- Development of new career certification pathways including culinary, welding, machine, and business dual credit offerings and college-level certifications.



PROGRESS SO FAR

Starting in the 2017-18 school year, Lee College and Goose Creek Memorial have made ambitious progress. Student participation in college-level, dual credit coursework has increased over 100 percent since last school year, with 294 students taking dual credit courses. Partners also added a significant number of new college-level dual credit courses to the high school course roster. Courses include Psychology 101, college-level math, Spanish, English, U.S. history, government, and sociology. Over 90 percent of students have earned a C or better in these first-semester courses.

Goose Creek Memorial and Lee College have implemented the Dana Center-developed college preparatory math and Lee College-developed college prep English courses, with approximately 20 students participating in each course. They plan to significantly increase the number of students participating in these courses during the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years. By 2020, they plan to engage nearly all students in need of remedial supports—about 95 percent—in these college preparatory courses.



3. Using Data to Examine Assumptions and Adjust Expectations

The campus of Oak Ridge High School, rebuilt in 2008, is as gleaming as the school's reputation in Tennessee. Oak Ridge students have high proficiency rates on state achievement tests and high rates of taking AP courses and passing the exams. The school also pays attention to a well-rounded education, if the impressive student artwork featured in the main lobby is any indication. The bucolic small-town setting belies its historic significance as a secret production site for atomic weapon materials during World War II under the Manhattan Project, which drew many scientists to the region.¹¹

But the school district and its college partner, Roane State College, are not self-satisfied and understand the need to adapt to become stronger. As such, they wanted to redesign the 12th grade as a result of rising awareness that their community and student body are becoming more diverse. A small but fast-growing Latino population is just one example of this increasing diversity.¹² Schools accustomed to serving a more homogeneous population often struggle to make the shifts required to succeed while supporting a more heterogeneous population to get ready for college and career, and the district and school leaders in Oak Ridge wanted to get ahead of this curve.

The school and college also increasingly recognize the importance of launching students toward more college degrees and credentials that hold value in the labor market, including but not exclusively bachelor's degrees. Indicative of this are their plans for a middle

college that would enable high school juniors and seniors to take college courses on a path to associate's degrees at Roane State. They also saw a 12th-grade redesign effort as a complementary part of a holistic effort aligned with Oak Ridge's 2020 vision for education that "prepares each student for excellence in education and the workplace, while cultivating integrity, responsibility and a sustained passion for continued learning."¹³

WHAT THEY'VE DONE

The partnership focused early and intently on analysis of data, including ACT scores and college enrollment rates of recent graduates. One of the patterns was eye opening for a high school whose staff is prone to thinking of college preparation solely as preparing students for four-year colleges. They saw that one-third of Oak Ridge's graduates attend community college, and over half of those students travel just half an hour's drive down the road to Roane State College. They also saw that just because students enrolled in college did not mean they were ready for it. Over half of the community college goers did not meet ACT's college-readiness benchmarks. And the high school's high ACT test results overall, relative to other high schools in the state, mask internal gaps by race and ethnicity, with Latino and black students meeting proficiency at far

lower rates than other students. Further, over one-fourth of graduates do not go to college at all.

The partners believed that creating more supportive pathways and instructional practices would help students who were not yet ready for college to take important steps toward college readiness and enrollment. As a result, they have started to strategize about providing more preparation and support systems to prepare students to take college courses early for dual enrollment, including strengthening and expanding Tennessee SAILS, a competency-based college-readiness curriculum in math and English that leads seamlessly into college-level courses. The high school also has identified additional college preparation opportunities for these students, many offered through their partnership with Roane State. These include a robust AVID college preparatory and support program, a dual credit college success course, and preparation for the ACCUPLACER placement test.

As important as these strategies are, so too has been the high school's focus on the need for teachers and staff to shift their mindsets about the ability of all students to grow, learn, and become ready for college and careers. Previously, some have seen

postsecondary potential only in students they considered having innate talent, a judgment which tends to be biased toward people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Instead of resigning students who initially struggle to lower-level courses, the adults need to adapt their practices so that all students can succeed in a rigorous curriculum. The high school is working with JFF to provide or identify professional development opportunities that emphasize “growth mindsets,” student-centered instructional practices that include differentiated instruction techniques, and building classroom practices based on rich and timely student feedback—all aligned with learning outcomes for college and career readiness and success.

PROGRESS SO FAR

The work of the partners in Oak Ridge is still in the analysis and planning stage because JFF identified their partnership some months after the Texas and Ohio sites. But implementation of their ideas surrounding the creation and expansion of the aforementioned strategies for seniors is imminent and anticipation of progress is high.

SIX EMERGING LESSONS ABOUT HIGH SCHOOL-COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS

The Zanesville, Goose Creek, and Oak Ridge partnerships are focused intently on designing new learning experiences to increase the number of high school graduates going to college and earning valuable degrees or short-term credentials. At the same time, they hope their work will generate valuable lessons for other school districts and postsecondary institutions interested in taking concrete steps to reach these goals. While supporting these partnerships, JFF also has gained important insights about what works to smooth the transition from high school to college, particularly for underprepared youth. In this section, we highlight key takeaways from the pilots that can inform educators advancing similar strategies in other communities.

1. TAKE A COMPREHENSIVE, DATA-DRIVEN, STRATEGIC VIEW

Before joining the 12th-grade pilot, all three partnerships had already been trying out an impressive array of programs to better prepare students for college-level work. Once they started the pilot, it was evident that few, if any, of their efforts were connected, much less part of a comprehensive strategy. Local educators had created the programs without analyzing exactly how many students needed them and what their ideal size would be. Further, high school and college leaders had rarely discussed any of their respective strategies with each

other to explore the potential for designing connections.

JFF helped each partnership to determine the number of 12th graders with different levels of need—college ready, nearly ready, and far from ready— and to do an inventory of current college-readiness programs.

The analysis enabled the partners to better understand all of the efforts already in place and to start connecting them into clear pathways. The partnerships also identified gaps in services and outlined what new or expanded programs, co-designed by the high schools and colleges, would help ensure that every 12th grader was on a path to completing college-level coursework in high school or during their first year of college. The emphasis on setting clear goals, aiming to reach all students, and using data analysis to drive decision making required shifts in both mindset and practice for the partners. Prioritizing the co-design, co-delivery, and co-validation of the interventions was also a major change for the high schools and colleges.

2. SET SIGHTS BEYOND READINESS TOWARD SUCCESS

High school leaders appreciated opportunities to learn about the experiences partnering colleges have had with their graduates and to strategize

about how to make improvements.

Together, they considered what it means for students to be truly ready for college-level coursework and designed supports that would help ensure more successful transitions into and through the first year of college.

Typically, high schools and colleges operate in their own secondary or postsecondary orbit. Staff rarely cross sectors to share feedback that would improve understanding of how to promote student success. Ironically, for example, most high schools use college-readiness assessments that do not take into account the content or academic demands of the placement exams colleges use to determine whether students can start taking college-level courses. Further, neither high schools nor colleges typically share, align, or coordinate the support systems, such as tutoring, advising, or college success courses, that each has designed separately for their own students.

The collaborative planning that the pilot's partners have done has revealed common challenges and opportunities for creating shared solutions for their shared students.

3. INVOLVE LEADERS AT ALL THE RIGHT LEVELS

An important feature of the 12th-grade redesign initiative was the significant amount of time that school district and college leaders dedicated to co-designing a strategy and piloting pathways. JFF initiated conversations with these leaders and secured their commitment, but soon realized how critical it was to have another key group involved in the planning, as well: high school principals.

Principals are often so focused on the day-to-day demands of their jobs, supporting the young people and teachers in their schools, that they must sacrifice time to reflect and strategize. Yet, with their roles positioned at the nexus of strategy and implementation, they are essential to the viability of any approach to improve outcomes for their students.

Each of the 12th-grade redesign partnerships relied heavily on the leadership of strong school principals who readily understood and supported the strategy. For example, a principal from Goose Creek ISD had already been planning and implementing numerous strategies for her 12th graders before the pilot began. She enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to fortify and formalize the work she had begun with Lee College.

4. DEDICATE STAFF TO THE TRANSITION BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

The work of the partnership teams advanced with the assistance of investments in capacity. One major investment is in staff whose role is to work across the high school and college to promote better transitions between the two. For example, Lee College employs a director of access and student success, while Zane State College employs a student success transition advisor. Each is responsible for doing outreach to high schools and students. The 12th-grade redesign work was a natural way to extend and enhance this work. It required good relationships and clear communication between school and college leaders and faculty in order to operationalize the support systems students need in the new transition pathways. Their appreciation for the on-the-ground realities of both high schools and college campuses also made them invaluable co-designers of the comprehensive strategic plans for redesigning the high school-to-college transition.

JFF also made important investments in each site's capacity, such as by facilitating the conversations and doing the project management needed to co-design, co-deliver, and co-validate each piloted

pathway and strategic plan. Each partner in each locale had the desire to work on this common endeavor, but also needed the catalyst of someone asking questions and advancing a work plan in order to take a step back from their daily demands. JFF's facilitation provided this continuity, continually focusing partners on goals for all students, the collection and analysis of data from high schools and colleges, and highlighting national research and examples of promising practice to inform deliberations and plans. If partnerships want to do such work well, with or without the help of an outside organization like JFF, they need to staff this function.

5. AGREE ON FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS

Initially, we underestimated the need to make sure that everyone involved in the partnerships held the same fundamental assumptions about the definition of postsecondary credentials and evidence of their growing value in the labor market. Doing so would have clarified our emphasis on creating routes to an array of good careers requiring technical skills and post-high school credentials, including two-year degrees or industry-validated short-term training, in addition to options toward a bachelor's degree. Not doing so left room for misunderstanding and misaligned expectations among the partners.

Late in the project, as we were encouraging one of the sites to define clear routes for every 12th grader as part of the partnership's strategic plan, a superintendent expressed concern that the partners were implicitly only valuing students going to the college after high school. The reason? Our initial emphasis on ensuring that all students pass gateway college-level math and English courses. It was difficult to step back so late in the project, as the superintendent had been harboring these feelings for some time, to lay out the full landscape of postsecondary routes that the partners might ultimately co-design, which may have felt more inclusive and reflective of the broader intent of the initiative.

6. REMEMBER THAT POLICY MATTERS

More than ever before, state and federal policy now encourage activities that create opportunities for high schools and colleges to create stronger bridges for students between secondary and postsecondary education. Through the Every Student Succeeds Act, Congress successfully pushed nearly all states to recognize school districts promoting early college-level course taking by including dual enrollment, AP, and International Baccalaureate completion in their accountability systems.¹⁴ And several states reward colleges in their performance-

based funding formulas by counting their work with high school students to improve student success outcomes.¹⁵

However, these incentives must be complemented by enhanced capacity, conditions, and encouragement for high schools and colleges to partner in the co-design, co-delivery, and co-validation of transitional experiences, especially for underserved students for whom these systems have traditionally struggled to provide support.

Through this lens, the work of the Zanesville, Baytown, and Oak Ridge partnerships can be seen as illustrative

practices by state leaders wanting to support more students, including underserved populations, to do well on indicators of college readiness and success. To recount an earlier development, leaders from the Ohio Board of Regents communicated to other colleges about the Zanesville partnership as an example of how to prepare a greater range of students to access and be successful in the state's dual enrollment program. This kind of partnership work should be featured and nurtured to provide signals to the field about the cultural shifts needed for high schools and colleges to respond positively in practice to new indicators and incentives.



OTHER STATE SUPPORT FOR SMOOTHER HIGH SCHOOL-COLLEGE TRANSITIONS

Our experience in supporting these partnerships also suggests the following ways that states could support stronger transitions from 12th grade through the first year of college:

- Encouraging responsible experimentation by K-12 and postsecondary partnerships that are engaged in co-design, co-delivery, and co-validation. This could include granting waivers allowing partners to pilot approaches to assessment and course placement contingent on strong student outcomes.
- Supporting joint professional development sessions for secondary and postsecondary leaders and faculty that include a strong focus on examining college readiness and success outcome data for students who make transitions between their institutions.
- Enabling K-12 and postsecondary partners to share staff and other resources to facilitate the co-design and co-delivery of support systems for students making transitions from high school to college. While additional resources can stimulate such behavior, states can at least

make sure that existing funding encourages partnership activities. For example, holding harmless K-12 and postsecondary partners for serving dual enrollees by not deducting their state enrollment-based funding (known as FTE and ADM) as some dual enrollment formulas do, increases the availability of existing funding for these purposes.

Conclusion

JFF's work with the three partnerships under this initiative has concluded. Its purpose was to pilot new approaches for improving the transition between 12th grade and the first year of college, strengthen the capacity of secondary-postsecondary partnerships, and facilitate the development of multiyear strategic plans.

For the partnerships, however, the work is just beginning, and there is good reason to believe that it will have a positive impact on students. Moreover, their efforts are early demonstrations that K-12 schools and colleges within the same communities can be motivated to systematize better transitions for students they so often share, by co-designing, co-delivering, and co-validating curriculum and other programming.

There are certainly extraordinary conditions that made these partnerships ripe testing grounds for reworking 12th grade to provide momentum for every student toward college completion. The leadership from K-12 and colleges in each community was chief among them. But the act of coming together to focus on the success of a shared set of students further motivated these budding partnerships to enhance and expand their joint work. Whatever the impetus and starting place of other K-12 and postsecondary partnerships, this kind of discipline and focus should hold similar benefits.

ENDNOTES

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- 2 Among several reasons, notable causes include a lack of preparation for the demands of college-level work, not knowing how to navigate course selection and financial aid processes, and difficulty finding academic and social support. *Remediation: Higher Education’s Bridge to Nowhere* (Indianapolis: Complete College America, 2012), https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/CCA%20Remediation%20ES%20FINAL.pdf
- 3 Andrew Rotherham, “Education Needs Big Ideas: Here’s one that would expand pre-K, improve high school and better the system overall,” *U.S. News & World Report*, June 15, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/articles/2017-06-15/toward-a-better-bigger-education-future-after-donald-trump>; *Raising Our Sights: No High School Senior Left Behind* (Princeton: Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2001).
- 4 For more information, see: “Ready or Not: It’s Time to Rethink 12th Grade,” JFF, n.d., <http://www.jff.org/initiatives/early-college-designs/ready-or-not-its-time-rethink-12th-grade>
- 5 For more information, see: “Postsecondary State Policy: A Jobs for the Future Initiative,” JFF, n.d., <http://www.jff.org/initiatives/postsecondary-state-policy>
- 6 For more information, see: “Pathways to Prosperity: A Jobs for the Future and Harvard Graduate School of Education Initiative,” JFF, n.d., <http://www.jff.org/initiatives/pathways-prosperity-network>
- 7 For more information, see: “Achieving the Dream,” home page, Achieving the Dream, 2018, <http://www.achievingthedream.org/>

- 8 See: “Search for Public Schools,” Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics, n.d., <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/>
- 9 Integrated advising systems use student-level progress data to inform the college’s provision of support and guidance, and corequisite coursework provides supportive instruction for students taking college-level coursework who otherwise would have been placed in developmental education.
- 10 The Transition to College Mathematics course includes quantitative reasoning and statistics content, in addition to algebraic content needed for students pursuing a major that requires Calculus. Integrated with the mathematics content are activities designed to develop what are sometimes referred to as “noncognitive” skills and behaviors predictive of students’ success in college, such as perseverance, goal setting, self-regulation, and time management. For more information, see: “Dana Center Transition to College Mathematics,” The Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas, n.d. <http://www.utdanacenter.org/pre-kindergarten-12-education/tools-for-teaching-and-learning/transition-to-college-mathematics/>
- 11 “Oak Ridge, TN,” Atomic Heritage Foundation, n.d., <https://www.atomicheritage.org/location/oak-ridge-tn>
- 12 “Oak Ridge, Tennessee Population: Census 2010 and 2000 Interactive Map, Demographics, Statistics, Quick Facts,” CensusViewer, n.d., <http://censusviewer.com/city/TN/Oak%20Ridge>
- 13 *Achieving Excellence in Education: Strategic Plan 2020* (Oak Ridge, Tennessee: Oak Ridge Schools, 2017), <https://www.ortn.edu/pdfs/2016-2017-StrategicPlan2020.pdf>
- 14 “ESEA Reauthorization Marks Pivotal Moment for Early College High Schools and Dual and Concurrent Enrollment,” press release, JFF, December 10, 2015, <http://www.jff.org/news-media/esea-reauthorization-marks-pivotal-moment-early-college-high-schools-and-dual-and>

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