educationfirst | Gates Foundation

Action Guide

Measurement

Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

Contents

Resource overview

Since March 2025, the Commission on Purposeful Pathways—with support from the Gates Foundation and led by Education First—has brought together 21 national experts and three young adult commissioners to envision and advocate for a future where every young person is equipped not only for a job but also for a fulfilling life, meaningful career, and economic mobility.

The Commission's full report, *A Launchpad for Life: A Vision for Purposeful Pathways for All Students,* introduces a conceptual framework and a call to action for the field to implement what are defined as ***purposeful pathways***.

Our vision: *All* students should experience high-quality advising, accelerated coursework, and career-connected learning that cultivate purpose, belonging, and social capital—ensuring that they graduate high school with agency and momentum on purposeful pathways toward economic mobility.

Increasingly coherent and integrated

Increasingly grounded in purpose, belonging, and social capital

Young people graduate high school with agency and momentum on purposeful pathways to achieve economic mobility.
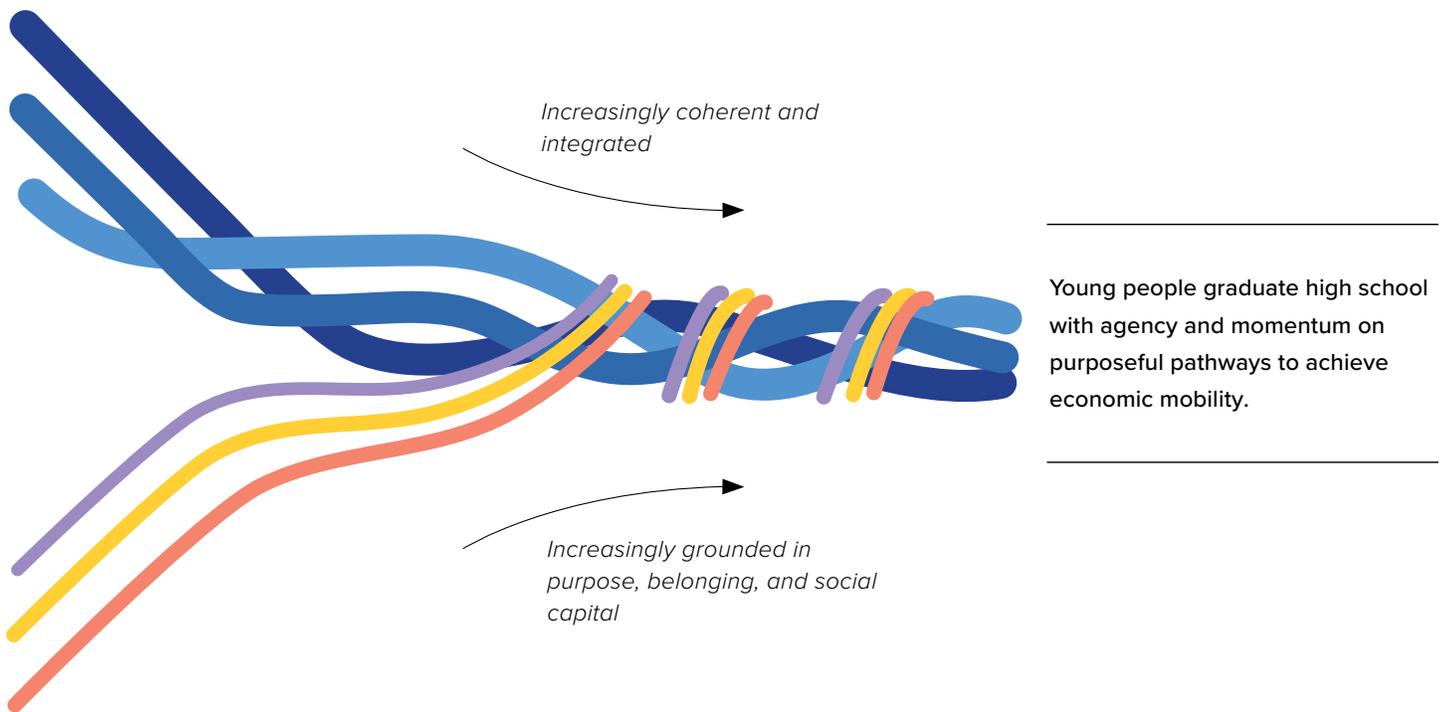
PROGRAMMATIC EXPERIENCES

- High-Quality Advising
- Accelerated Coursework Sequences
- Career-Connected Learning

CULTIVATION OF AGENCY

- Purpose
- Belonging
- Social Capital

Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

Introduction to measuring purposeful pathways

This action guide was developed to help regions and states realize the vision for purposeful pathways. The Commission created two additional resources: *High-Impact Practices Action Guide*; and *Enabling Conditions Action Guide*.

Together, these resources provide tangible examples and multiple entry points for leaders to make progress on the recommendations introduced in *A Launchpad for Life*:

- Provide *all* students with purposeful pathways.

- Hardwire purpose, belonging, and social capital into every pathway.

- Move the goalposts beyond the high school diploma to economic mobility.

- Make student transitions a shared responsibility.

Undergirding each of these recommendations are some initial, actionable steps—as well as a commitment to changing how systems collaborate to ensure that pathways are responsive to what young people,

Data-driven continuous improvement: Measurement plays a critical role in driving systems change. When measuring purposeful pathways, continuous improvement allows cross-sector partners to harness insights to guide their inquiry and inform ongoing decisionmaking about pathways design and implementation.

employers, and their communities need. Measurement plays a critical role in driving systems change by aligning cross-sector partners around common metrics, promoting mutual accountability, and deepening system leaders' understanding of what drives long-term outcomes.

This guide is informed by the work of many field-leading organizations, researchers, and practitioners. The Commission builds upon a strong consensus around measures that track students' momentum as the transition across systems—into and through college and their early careers. But this guide also addresses some gaps in the measurement of pathways—offering potential metrics and considerations for system leaders to adapt in their local contexts.

Shifts supported by this action guide

From disjointed, siloed approaches ...	... to coherent, student-centered approaches of measurement
Metrics focused on siloed programs that measure progress toward **college or career**	***Providing all students with programmatic experiences that begin in high school and build momentum toward college and careers.*** This requires system leaders to map students' access, participation, and outcomes related to high-quality advising, accelerated coursework, and career-connected learning—and then align on shared goals to drive universal access to purposeful pathways. **This action guide offers a measurement framework and potential metrics to support this work.**
Measures that only consider **traditional academic and programmatic outcomes**	***Hardwiring purpose, belonging, and social capital into every pathway***. This requires educators and system leaders to audit programmatic experiences to identify where agency is and is not developed—and to ask students for their opinions and insights via surveys or other mechanisms.
Measures that position **high school diploma attainment as the finish line** for most students	***Moving the goalposts beyond the high school diploma to economic mobility.*** This requires cross-sector partners to align on shared, measurable goals that track student progress toward earning credentials of value and gaining employment in jobs with family-sustaining wages. These goals should be refined with employers and community input so they reflect the needs, realities, and opportunities in the region.
Measures that take a **narrow view of student transitions across K-12, higher education, and workforce** systems	***Making student transitions a shared responsibility.*** Aligning on priority metrics provides leaders across K-12, higher education, and workforce systems with data to inform their continuous improvement of pathways to ensure that programs and partnerships provide coherent, mutually beneficial experiences as young people move between education and employment.

How to use this action guide

This guide was developed for **pathmaking teams**—or cross-sector teams with the right blend of institutional authority, influence, and proximity to programs to design and implement purposeful pathways. As part of that design and implementation work, teams must also shift what they collectively measure to inform decisionmaking, track progress, and drive continuous improvement.

Pathmaking teams are cross-sector partnerships, ideally backed by governance structures, that empower practitioner-leaders in K-12, higher education, workforce, and intermediary organizations to design, implement, assess, and scale purposeful pathways. Pathmaking teams should be composed of mid-level leaders—senior enough to direct teams and make decisions but close enough to the work that it remains a central part of their responsibilities and they are knowledgeable about its progress. They are championed by executive leaders who can build alignment and bring visibility to their work.

Pathways intermediaries play a pivotal role *as members of pathmaking teams* by knitting K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems together. Their work is an indispensable part of building capacity at the local and state levels, creating reporting and accountability infrastructure through data-sharing agreements and helping structure internships and apprenticeship programs that connect students to employers. Intermediaries should be thought of as a *function* rather than a specific *organization type*. Research has shown that various organization types, from independent nonprofits to colleges, schools, or chambers of commerce, can all play this role well.

Measurement framework to support purposeful pathways

The measurement framework translates the Commission's vision for purposeful pathways into a practical structure that pathmaking teams can use to align goals and strengthen cross-sector collaboration over time. The measures are aligned to students' progression through their education—from access to high-quality pathway experiences in high school that cultivate purpose, belonging, and social capital to successful transitions after graduation and, ultimately, long-term success.

The metrics presented are comprehensive, but not exhaustive. Students move more fluidly across K-12, higher education, and workforce systems than any single graphic can capture. For that reason, the framework is designed to be adapted locally and leaders from all sectors on the pathmaking team should be consulted in the design of regional metrics to build alignment and shared responsibility.

	Provide *all* students with purposeful pathways in high school		And ensure they graduate with momentum to achieve economic mobility	
	Programmatic experiences	**Cultivation of agency**	**High school transition**	**Long-term success**
Theory of change	If students successfully receive high-quality advising, accelerated coursework sequences, and career-connected learning …	… and are supported in cultivating purpose, belonging, and social capital to further their potential and goals …	… then students will complete high school with the momentum to successfully transition to education or employment opportunities …	… and ultimately earn credentials with labor market value and develop networks that put them on a path to a career with upward economic mobility.
Student-centered measures	1. High-Quality Advising 2. Accelerated Coursework Sequences 3. Career-Connected Learning	4. Purpose 5. Belonging 6. Social Capital	7. High School Graduation 8. Post-High School Education and Employment	9. Credentials of Value 10. Workforce and Economic Mobility

The vision for purposeful pathways is aspirational, but within reach.

As such, this measurement framework also reflects an aspiration that challenges pathmaking teams to assess whether all students are experiencing all aspects of purposeful pathways and to track the progress of students as they move across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems.

Measurement details

The pages that follow provide the practical detail needed to put the measurement framework into action. They describe what to measure, when to measure it, and what to consider when selecting metrics so pathmaking teams can move from shared vision to shared practice.

In particular, the framework emphasizes that **the cultivation of agency is not optional or secondary**. Purpose, belonging, and social capital are essential drivers of whether students engage in pathway experiences, persist through challenges, and make successful transitions. Because these outcomes are not fully captured by administrative data alone, the measures that follow include student-reported options (e.g., surveys, interviews, and other feedback strategies) alongside more traditional indicators.

Each measure is presented in a consistent format— **Overview, Potential Metrics**, and **Considerations**—to make the information easy to navigate and apply. Regions and states can begin with the data they already collect, identify priority gaps, and strengthen measures over time as partnerships and data systems mature.

This section is organized according to the measurement framework's theory of change and the vision for purposeful pathways:

- **Programmatic experiences:** Measures of access, participation, and outcomes related to advising, accelerated coursework, and career-connected learning—along with considerations related to quality and rigor.

- **Cultivation of agency:** Measures and example survey items that help teams understand purpose, belonging, and social capital, with considerations for using established scales, balancing survey length with data quality, and triangulating student-reported findings with other indicators.

- **High school transition:** Measures that track postsecondary and workforce progress after graduation, including milestones toward credentials of value and employment aligned with family-sustaining wages.

- **Long-term success:** Measures that reflect economic mobility over time and support cross-sector partners in using data to improve experiences that begin in high school and are intended to drive long-term outcomes.

● 1. High-Quality Advising

Overview

High-quality advising should include:

- Consistent support in developing college-going and/or occupational aspirations and goals.

- Reliance on a range of strategies, such as one-to-one formal advising, mentorship, and/or the use of AI/tech-enabled tools to assist with exploration and goal setting.

- Processes and guidance that support students in navigating personal circumstances and their goals to make informed decisions about program affordability and other considerations.

- Strong connections with trusted adults, including their families, educators, college advisors, career navigators, formal or informal mentors, near-peers, and others.

Note: At present, the field does not have consensus about a career navigation or similar advising metric to assess whether students are completing high school with sufficient momentum to reach their desired career paths. Regions and states should consider developing a metric that indicates whether students are acting on their Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP).

Potential metrics

Grades 9–12

- % of students by grade who participate in regular high-quality advising (e.g., at minimum student met with advisor 2x per year)

- % of students who complete and regularly update an Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) with their advisor

By the end of grade 11

- % of students who take the ACT or SAT

By the end of grade 12

- % of seniors who submitted at least two college applications

- % of seniors who complete the FAFSA by June 30

- % of seniors who are admitted to at least one "match" postsecondary institution

Considerations

- **Define quality clearly:** Establish measurable criteria for high-quality advising, such as completeness and relevance of ICAP, so data reflect meaningful guidance rather than simple form completion.

- **Measure regularly:** Specify how often advising interactions and plan updates must be documented and distinguish between types of advising interactions to ensure consistent reporting across schools.

- **Capture intensity and type of advising interaction:** Record not only whether advising occurred but also the general category of the interaction (such as advice to explore

and match interests/talents to good fit postsecondary destinations or well-informed academic guidance about key milestones they need to reach throughout high school), allowing leaders to understand which forms of advising are most connected to later outcomes.

- **Treat advising metrics as leading indicators:** Use advising-related measures, such as plan updates and documented advising interactions, as leading indicators linked to key transition outcomes like financial aid completion, timely applications, and enrollment aligned to student goals.

● 2. Accelerated Coursework Sequences

Overview

Accelerated coursework sequences are defined as:

- A **sequence of coherent college and career acceleration courses** culminating in transferable college credits and/or industry-recognized credentials at little or no cost to students. Examples include:

    - Dual enrollment (DE) courses organized into coherent sequences aligned to postsecondary degree pathways.

    - Progressive sequence of career technical education (CTE) courses with related dual enrollment coursework and industry-recognized credentials embedded into the default course plan.

    - Structured dual enrollment programs like Early College High Schools (ECHSs) and Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECHs).

    - Rigorous coursework that yields college credit, such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) coursework.

- No matter the type, accelerated coursework sequences should allow students to make progress toward credentials of value that align with high-wage, high-demand careers and be supported by outreach, advising, academic support, and high-quality instruction.

Potential metrics

By the beginning of grade 9

- % of accelerated coursework capacity at the school level for all incoming 9th graders to take at least one accelerated course during high school

By the end of grade 11

- % of students enrolled in at least 1 accelerated course (inclusive of AP, IB, DE, and CTE) that is part of a coherent sequence

- % of students receiving any college credit in accelerated coursework sequences (inclusive of AP, IB, DE, and CTE)

By the end of grade 12

- % of students who have enrolled in at least 3 accelerated courses in a coherent sequence (inclusive of AP, IB, DE, and CTE)

- % of students receiving at least 6 college credits in accelerated coursework sequences (inclusive of AP, IB, DE, and CTE)

Note: See the High School Graduation student-centered measure (#8) for a potential metric that reflects a more ambitious goal of assessing how many students graduate with 12+ transferable college credits, signifying one semester of progress toward a postsecondary degree.

Considerations

- **Emphasize course sequences that actually count toward credentials:** Focus on metrics such as the number of transferable, program-aligned credits students earn rather than simple participation in any advanced course. This requires deeper collaboration between high schools and colleges but ensures that measures capture meaningful momentum rather than isolated course taking.

- **Disaggregate types of advanced coursework:** Report participation and success rates separately for categories of advanced coursework such as AP, IB, DE, and advanced CTE courses. This provides visibility into the mix of offerings and identifies where students experience the most success.

● 3. Career-Connected Learning

Overview

Career-connected learning is a continuum of experiences that broadens student access to jobs and opportunities within their communities and beyond. That continuum includes:

- Career awareness *(learning about work*, including field trips, guest speakers/career talks, and career days)

- Career exploration (*learning for work*, including job shadowing, informational and mock interviews)

- Career preparation (*learning through work*, including career development/professional learning, training programs, and simulated experiences)

- Career training (*learning at work*, including work-based learning experiences such as internships and youth apprenticeships)

Note: While related to similar terms like work-based learning and CTE, this Commission uses career-connected learning as an umbrella term, referring to a spectrum of experiences that bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-world application.

Potential metrics

At the beginning of grade 9

- % of career-connected learning capacity at the school-level for all incoming 9th graders to experience at least one career-connected learning opportunity during high school in their school and/or community, to be defined regionally (e.g., presence of job fairs, career talks, or other programming or internship offerings)

By the end of grade 10

- % of students participating in career awareness/exploration activities, to be defined regionally

By the end of grade 12

- % of students participating in career-connected learning, to be defined regionally

- % of students completing an industry-recognized credential during high school

- % of students participating in CTE coursework who concentrate in an in-demand pathway, as defined by regional labor market data

Note: There is significant overlap between #3 Career-Connected Learning and #8 High School Graduation, so we've opted to reflect nondegree credentials of value in both student-centered measures. For this measure, the focus is on completion of industry-recognized credentials only, while High School Graduation addresses the attainment of degree and nondegree credentials of value more broadly.

Considerations

- **Measure progress across grades:** Differentiate early career awareness and exploration from more intensive career-connected learning, and establish measurable expectations for each grade or grade band so progress can be monitored throughout high school.

- **Set minimum quality expectations for experiences:** Define duration, supervision, safety, reflection, and integration with coursework so metrics do not conflate a one-day job shadow with a sustained internship or apprenticeship.

- **Differentiate delivery settings and formats:** Report career-connected learning experiences by type such as in-person placement, virtual placement, industry project, or career event to ensure metrics reflect the depth and structure of each student experience.

- **Plan for employer ecosystem capacity:** Track both student participation and employer-side indicators such as number and diversity of employer partners, and repeat participation to ensure an adequate supply of opportunities to meet demand.

● 4. Purpose

Overview

Purpose refers to students feeling empowered on their learning journeys in ways that sustain their connection to a "self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning."

Purpose matters because it represents students' personal motivation that must be maintained through their transitions between high school, postsecondary learning, and their careers.

Considerations

- **Use established measurement scales:** Employ multi-item scales with documented validity, reliability, and scoring guidance. Asking a set of questions to assess a single construct yields more accurate insights than a single question.

- **Balance survey length with data quality:** Ensure instruments are short enough to reduce fatigue but include a sufficient number of items to produce reliable and interpretable measures.

- **Triangulate survey findings with other indicators:** Interpret results alongside behavioral data such as attendance or disciplinary patterns to contextualize trends in student-reported experiences.

Potential metrics

Between grades 9–12, systems should measure students' sense of purpose every year when possible. If annual measurement isn't feasible yet, systems should measure at least twice during high school to track growth by following the same group of students over time.

The survey questions below are illustrative examples of potential options that are typically administered as part of a longer student survey covering a broader set of topics and domains.

Purpose and Relevance (Motivate Lab GPS)

- I learn topics in this class that will be useful to me in the future.
- I'm unable to put in the time needed to do well in this class.
- I often connect what I learn in this class to my everyday life.
- I find this class really interesting.

Sense of Purpose Scale (Search Institute SCALE Measures)

- I put a lot of effort into making my goals a reality.
- I understand what gives my life meaning.
- It is important for me to make the world a better place in some way.

Occupational identity Scale (Search Institute SCALE Measures)

- I have a clear sense about what careers I am interested in pursuing.
- I see my current life experiences as useful to my future career.
- I know what steps to take to reach my career goals.
- People like me are successful in the careers that interest me.

● 5. Belonging

Overview

Belonging refers to students' sense of being supported by adults and encouraged to seek help to explore their aspirations as well as being able to trust peers and adults in their communities when navigating challenges and making decisions about their futures.

Belonging matters because it empowers young people to see themselves on different college and career pathways and supports persistence and success as students "try on" new opportunities.

Considerations

- **Use established measurement scales:** Employ multi-item scales with documented validity, reliability, and scoring guidance. Asking a set of questions to assess a single construct yields more accurate insights than a single question.

- **Balance survey length with data quality:** Ensure instruments are short enough to reduce fatigue but include a sufficient number of items to produce reliable and interpretable measures.

- **Triangulate survey findings with other indicators:** Interpret results alongside behavioral data such as attendance or disciplinary patterns to contextualize trends in student-reported experiences.

Potential metrics

Between grades 9–12, pathmaking teams should measure students' sense of belonging every year when possible. If that isn't feasible yet, systems should measure at least twice during high school to track growth by following the same group of students over time.

The survey questions below are illustrative examples of potential options that are typically administered as part of a longer student survey covering a broader set of topics and domains:

Sense of Belonging (Motivate Lab GPS)

- I belong in this class.
- Sometimes I feel like I belong in this class, and sometimes I feel like I don't belong in this class.
- I feel that my values and goals are well matched with those of this college.
- I am very involved in groups and/or activities at this college/university.

School Belonging Scale (Panorama Student Survey)

- How well do people at your school understand the kind of person you are?
- How much respect do students at your school show you?
- How much support do adults at your school give you?
- When you are at school, how much do you feel like you belong?

Affirming Identities Learning Condition
(PERTS Elevate/UChicago Impact Cultivate)

- This teacher makes sure different backgrounds and perspectives are valued and supported.
- I see positive examples of people like me in the things we learn in this class.

6. Social Capital

Overview

Social capital refers to students' access to and ability to mobilize relationships that help further their potential and goals. Developing networking skills as well as building students' networks can support and reinforce belonging and purpose.

Social capital matters because it provides students with critical skills and networks to activate their plans for their futures, opening doors to connect young people to a broader set of opportunities.

Considerations

- **Measure access to relationships:** Track whether students report knowing adults or peers who can provide guidance, information, or support related to school, careers, or personal goals.

- **Measure the ability to use relationships:** Include items that capture students' confidence or comfort in asking for help, seeking advice, or forming new connections so social capital is not assessed solely by network size.

- **Prioritize bridging and linking ties in measurement:** Distinguish between relationships outside a student's immediate circle (bridging ties) and relationships with adults who have access to information, influence, or institutional authority (linking ties) so metrics capture students' exposure to new networks aligned to their interests, sense of purpose, and goals.

- **Use established measurement scales:** Employ multi-item scales with documented validity, reliability, and scoring guidance. Asking a set of questions to assess a single construct yields more accurate insights than a single question.

Potential metrics

Between grades 9–12, pathmaking teams should measure students' social capital every year when possible. If that isn't feasible yet, systems should measure at least twice during high school to track growth by following the same group of students over time

The survey questions below are illustrative examples of potential options that are typically administered as part of a longer student survey covering a broader set of topics and domains:

Network diversity scale   ([Search Institute SCALE Measures](#))

- I have people in my network with different skills that will be useful to me as I pursue my goals.

- I have people in my network with many different careers or career interests.

- I have people in my network from many different cultures or racial/ethnic backgrounds.

- I have people in my network from many different economic backgrounds.

Network Strength Scale   ([Search Institute SCALE Measures](#))

- I have people in my network that I can trust to help me pursue my education or career goals.

- I have people in my network that introduce me to others who can help me reach my education or career goals.

- I have people in my network I am close to that help me pursue my education or career goals.

- I have people in my network I am less close to but who are influential in helping me reach my education or career goals.

- I have people in my network who help me when they say they are going to help me.

6. Social Capital

Potential metrics for Social Capital continued from previous page

Potential metrics

Self-Initiated Social Capital   (Search Institute SCALE Measures)

- When working toward my education or career goals, I ask for help when I need it.

- I go out of my way to meet new people in order to reach my education or career goals.

- I form strong relationships with people who are useful for helping me reach my education or career goals.

Networking Skills   (Search Institute SCALE Measures)

- I build relationships with people in my network who can help advance my education or career goals.

- I find ways to pay back people in my network for helping me out.

- I use my current network to meet new people.

- I am able to use the resources I gain from my network to pursue my goals.

Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

● 7. High School Graduation

Overview

High school graduation marks a key educational milestone, demonstrating that students have met core academic expectations and are prepared to take next steps toward college, training, or work. While the diploma alone no longer guarantees long-term economic security, completing high school remains essential for accessing most postsecondary and employment opportunities. Students are more likely to graduate when they experience clear course pathways, consistent support, and environments that help them stay engaged. A strong high school experience ensures students graduate high school with a plan and the basic preparation needed to pursue further learning or work.

Considerations

- **Use consistent cohort definitions:** Apply a uniform definition of the freshman cohort across 4-year and 6-year graduation measures to ensure that graduation indicators are accurate and comparable.

- **Apply transparent, state-approved readiness benchmarks:** Use clearly defined and publicly documented standards for college, career, military, and civic readiness and disaggregate to provide visibility around how long-term outcomes vary across readiness pathways.

- **Verify postsecondary value of credits and credentials reported at graduation:** Ensure college credits, industry credentials, and other readiness indicators included at graduation meet state criteria for transferability, applicability, and labor-market value.

Potential metrics

By the end of grade 12

- % of a freshman cohort that earns a standard high school diploma within 4 years (4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate)

- % of a freshman cohort that earns a standard high school diploma within 6 years (6-Year Cohort Graduation Rate)

- % of students meeting state standards for college and career readiness by high school graduation, including college readiness measures (e.g., AP or IB courses or exams, DE, college admissions test, or state-specific indicators such as NYS Regents Exam completion or A-G Completion in California), career readiness measures (e.g., industry-recognized credentials, CTE pathway completion, work-based learning), and military and civic readiness measures (e.g., ASVAB AFQT, Military Outcomes such as enlistment)

- % of students graduating with 12+ transferable college credits that are, ideally, aligned to and can be applied to a postsecondary program of study

- % of students graduating with a degree or with a nondegree credential of value, which are typically defined at the state-level based on labor-market demand, median wages relative to high school graduates, and stackability into higher-level credentials or degrees

Note: There is significant overlap between High-Quality Advising and High School Graduation. Many output-oriented advising metrics—such as FAFSA completion, college applications, and acceptance to a well-matched postsecondary institution—are categorized under High-Quality Advising rather than High School Graduation. This categorization ensures a stronger connection between advising activities and the most critical advising outputs by the end of high school.

● 8. Post-High School Education and Employment

Overview

The period immediately after high school is a critical transition in which young people begin to put their plans into action. Whether they enroll in college, join the military, enter an apprenticeship, or take on early employment, these first steps shape later opportunities. Many students face challenges related to affordability, logistics, and unfamiliar systems. Preparation that includes clear information, exposure to options, and structured guidance increases the likelihood that students make sustained progress in their chosen pathway. Effective transitions reflect both readiness and the availability of supports that help graduates move into their next setting with confidence.

Considerations

- **Consider the quality of placements:** Include immediate college enrollment, military enlistment, apprenticeships, or employment above a wage floor, and disaggregate these categories to identify meaningful trends in post-high school pathways.

- **Define "good jobs" within communities:** Develop a shared definition that reflects local labor-market realities: a good job covers basic living needs and provides benefits, reliable hours, safe working conditions, and a real chance to build skills and advance. Because costs of living and job opportunities vary by place, align this definition to a regional living-wage benchmark and use it consistently when setting targets and measuring outcomes. Jobs for the Future's American Job Quality Study defines a quality job as "one that allows workers to meet their basic financial needs, feel safe and respected, grow their skills, have a voice in decisions that affect them, and exercise some control over their time and work."

- **Invest in education to workforce data systems:** Build or strengthen data systems that link K-12, higher education, and workforce information so transition outcomes can be measured accurately and consistently.

Potential metrics

Within 6 months of high school graduation

- % of students who graduate with a college acceptance but do not enroll

- % of students with immediate enrollment in postsecondary education in a program of study aligned to high-wage, high-demand jobs within 1 year OR with immediate placement into a promising occupation and/or credential-granting apprenticeship

Note: The Commission on Purposeful Pathways designed this metric as a high bar standard for communities to work toward. Collecting the data for this measure may be challenging for communities, particularly those just getting started in their work to strengthen and improve pathways. All communities must seek to define the terms within this metric to understand which jobs qualify as high wage and high demand. Additional work may also be needed to analyze which programs of study put students on track to attain those jobs.

Compound metrics like this should also be disaggregated to provide visibility about trends and patterns, particularly by subgroup.

The first year after high school graduation ("grade 13")

- % of students at postsecondary institutions who complete both entry-level mathematics and English courses by the end of their first year in postsecondary (i.e., gateway courses)

- % of students who enroll in postsecondary and persist from fall to spring of their first year and to their second year

- % of students who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) one year after their high school graduation (inclusive of enrollment in military programs)

● 9. Credentials of Value

Overview

In the simplest terms, credentials of value refer to college degrees and nondegree credentials that unlock jobs that pay more than jobs only requiring a high school diploma. While more specific definitions vary by context, in this report the term refers broadly to include traditional college degrees, industry-recognized credentials, and other nondegree credentials that are high quality, affordable, and deliver value in the form of increased wages. Emerging efforts at the state level seek to validate credentials of value and to identify which are most requested by employers in specific industries or fields.

Considerations

- **Develop a credentials of value framework:** Use clear, measurable criteria such as alignment to in-demand occupations, earnings above a regional living-wage benchmark, transferability, and stackability so credential value can be measured consistently. Collaboration across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce is vital in developing this framework.

- **Revalidate credential lists regularly:** Establish a recurring review process using outcomes data such as wage, employment, continuation, and applicability so the list reflects credentials with demonstrated value rather than growing stale or including low-value options.

- **Track stacking and progression, not only individual credentials:** Measure how often early credentials lead to higher-level credentials or degrees so reporting reflects long-term opportunity rather than tallying one-off certificates.

Potential metrics

2 Years after high school graduation

- % of students earning a nondegree credential of value (e.g., certificates, apprenticeships, industry-recognized credentials)

3 years after high school graduation

- % of students earning an associate degree

- % of students earning a degree or nondegree credential of value (e.g., certificates, apprenticeships, industry-recognized credentials)

6 years after high school graduation

- % of students earning an associate degree

- % of students earning a bachelor's degree

- % of students earning an associate or bachelor's degree

- % of students earning a degree or nondegree credential of value (e.g., certificates, apprenticeships, industry-recognized credentials)

● 10. Workforce and Economic Mobility

Overview

Workforce and economic mobility outcomes provide a longer-term view of how young adults fare as they establish themselves in the labor market. Measures such as stable employment, sustained earnings, and opportunities for advancement help indicate whether individuals have been able to turn their education and early experiences into durable economic footing. These outcomes are influenced by many factors—education, local labor markets, access to training, and ongoing support. Monitoring them offers insight into how well systems are helping young people secure employment that supports long-term stability and growth.

Considerations

- **Base "family-sustaining wage" on regional living-wage calculations:** Tie wage thresholds to local cost-of-living data such as living-wage benchmarks, and refresh benchmarks periodically as economies shift.

- **Use multiple time horizons to differentiate short- and long-run outcomes:** Report employment and earnings at one, four, and seven or more years after high school to show how different pathways unfold over time.

- **Integrate ROI perspectives carefully and transparently:** When measuring program-level ROI, document underlying assumptions and contextualize results so ROI comparisons reflect differences in program costs, fields of study, and student characteristics.

Potential metrics

Ages 18–24

- % of young adults who are Not Engaged in Employment or Training (NEET) and inclusive of enrollment in military programs

  Note: this metric is not cohort-based and instead aligns with a broader age range to align with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) benchmarking.

By age 25

- Employment and labor participation rates

- % of young adults earning 100%/140%/180% of the living wage in a state or region for a single adult (Example: MIT Living Wage Calculator)

- % of students completing a nondegree credential where the median earnings of completers minus 150% of the federal poverty rate for a single adult is equal or greater than the published cost of tuition and fees (Example: Workforce Pell)

By age 28

- Positive ROI within 10 years of earning credential based on the cumulative 10-year earnings being greater or equal to the investment, opportunity cost, and base comparison wage (Example: Texas HB1)

- % of students completing a nondegree credential where the median earnings of completers minus 150% of the federal poverty rate for a single adult is equal or greater than the published cost of tuition and fees (Example: Workforce Pell)

Measurement considerations

Looking across the measurement framework, there are several cross-cutting considerations to take into account when designing data collection and leveraging metrics for decisionmaking.

1. **Disaggregate data to support all students:** To support all high school students in developing a plan that will set them up for success after graduation, state and local leaders should set universal goals for all students and use targeted strategies to achieve them. Disaggregated data are critical to understanding differences in student access, participation, and outcomes in pathways experiences. As such, the measures included in this guide should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, household income, gender, academic preparedness, and specific industry pathways. Using these data, educators and leaders can begin to address academic policies, mindsets, and other limiting factors that may act as barriers for some students to successfully engage with programmatic experiences in high school.

2. **Measure access, participation, and outcomes:** These need to be analyzed together because one component can suggest progress in isolation while masking inequities elsewhere. A district can expand access to a pathway experience, for example, but still see uneven participation if prerequisites, scheduling, transportation, awareness, or advising impact who actually enrolls. Looking across all three (and disaggregating) helps leaders distinguish whether the constraint is availability, uptake, or impact and then target the right lever— removing barriers to entry, strengthening supports to sustain engagement, or improving the quality of the experience so it translates into meaningful results.

3. **Conduct cohort analysis to follow students across systems:** Following cohorts of students that start 9th grade in the same school year across high school, the transition into postsecondary or workforce, and into early adulthood provides a clear view of how students progress through each stage of the pathway. Tracking the same group over time highlights key transition points, such as early high school success, access to accelerated coursework sequences, completion of career-connected experiences, graduation, and immediate postsecondary or workforce entry, and shows where progress strengthens or weakens. This approach shifts systems from isolated snapshots to a coherent longitudinal view, revealing whether cohorts are on track for long-term success and which early experiences best predict positive transitions and adult outcomes.

4. **Utilize tech platforms to measure purposeful pathways:** These systems can provide more frequent, granular, and comprehensive insights on whether students are experiencing all elements of the programmatic experiences and the cultivation of agency. In the absence of technology systems, reporting on the metrics in the measurement framework can be very challenging because the data often reside in multiple systems and spreadsheets and integrating that data at the student-level can be time consuming. As a result, comprehensive measurement is typically infrequent and less detailed than necessary to ensure that schools are providing all students with purposeful pathways through their high school careers.

5. **Consider data/accountability as an enabling condition:** Data are critical tools for communities to develop and sustain deep, collaborative partnerships across sectors. The use of common metrics across K-12, higher education, and workforce can signal mutual commitment to supporting students in their transitions across systems and increase accountability. Communities that are further along in their cross-sector partnerships may also look to systemize and scale their work by establishing more rigorous data systems. To learn more, see the Enabling Conditions Action Guide.
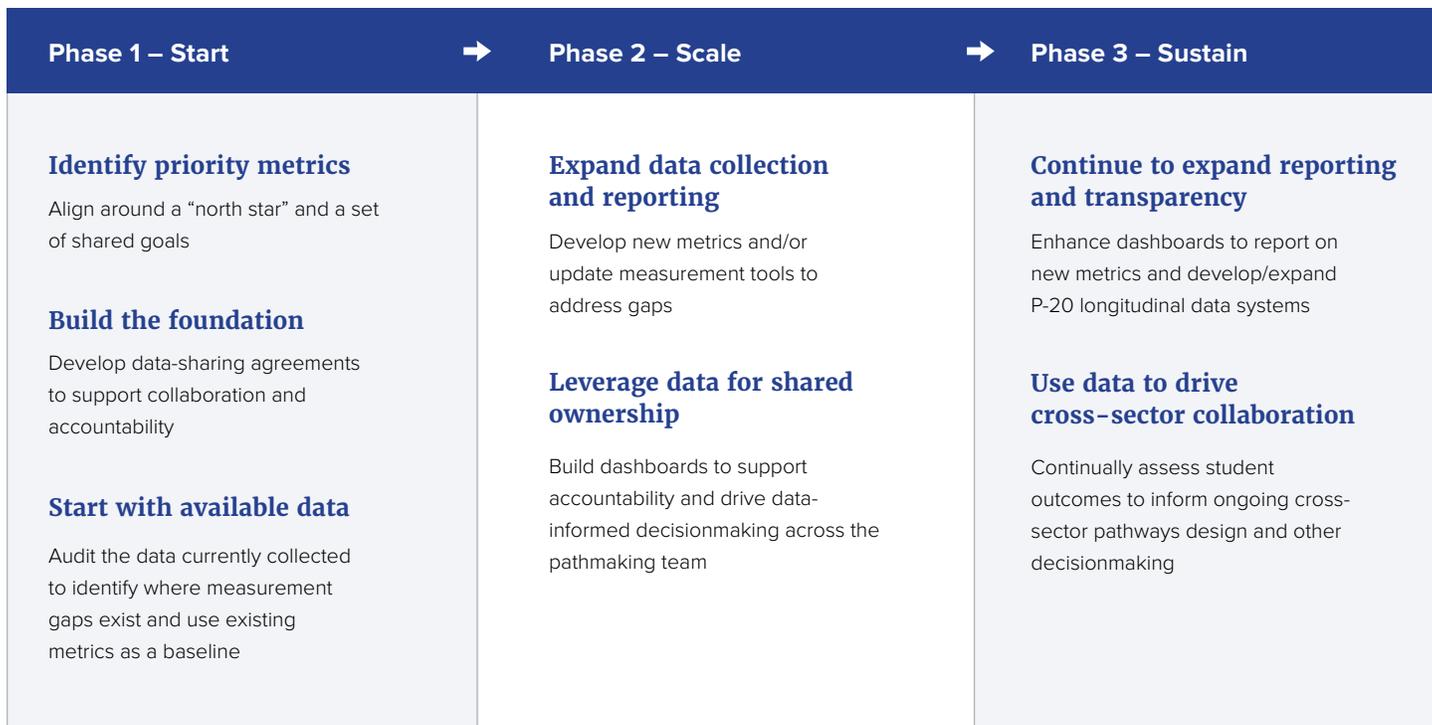
Implementation activities

Overview of implementation phases

Regions and systems will enter this work from different starting points. Some regions are just beginning to align partners and define shared metrics; others already have data-sharing agreements, dashboards, and longitudinal infrastructure in place. The implementation phases that follow are designed to reflect that reality—there is an entry point for everyone. Rather than a strict, linear checklist, these phases describe a common arc that many pathmaking teams follow as they strengthen measurement to support purposeful pathways over time.

Across **Start, Scale, and Sustain**, the focus shifts from establishing shared goals and using existing metrics to set a baseline for collaboration, to strengthening the quality and completeness of data (including student-reported measures), and ultimately to institutionalizing measurement as an ongoing cross-sector practice that drives continuous improvement and shared responsibility for outcomes. Teams may find themselves in more than one phase at once—for example, "starting" in one area (such as measuring purpose, belonging, and social capital) while "scaling" another (such as post-high school outcomes).

The pages that follow provide more detailed guidance for each phase, including suggested activities, sequencing considerations, and examples of how roles and responsibilities may be shared across K-12, higher education, workforce, and intermediary partners.

Phase 1 – Start	➡	Phase 2 – Scale	➡	Phase 3 – Sustain
Identify priority metrics Align around a "north star" and a set of shared goals **Build the foundation** Develop data-sharing agreements to support collaboration and accountability **Start with available data** Audit the data currently collected to identify where measurement gaps exist and use existing metrics as a baseline		**Expand data collection and reporting** Develop new metrics and/or update measurement tools to address gaps **Leverage data for shared ownership** Build dashboards to support accountability and drive data-informed decisionmaking across the pathmaking team		**Continue to expand reporting and transparency** Enhance dashboards to report on new metrics and develop/expand P-20 longitudinal data systems **Use data to drive cross–sector collaboration** Continually assess student outcomes to inform ongoing cross-sector pathways design and other decisionmaking

Implementation roadmap

This **implementation roadmap** suggests the concrete steps that practitioners—and in particular, data and measurement leads working within and across systems— would take to deepen the regional- or state-level use of metrics to assess and improve purposeful pathways.

Phase 1 – Start		
Key activities	**Suggested concrete steps**	**Sector(s) responsible**
Identify priority metrics	Align around a "north star" and a set of shared goals. Using the measurement framework, identify priority metrics and determine which ones can be tracked in the near term.	Intermediary leads with K-12, postsecondary, and workforce partners
Build the foundation	Develop formal data-sharing agreements among K-12, postsecondary, and workforce partners to allow the pathmaking team to track the common metrics that have been identified. These data-sharing agreements will likely need to evolve and grow over time based on the availability of additional metrics.	Intermediary leads
Start with available data	Prioritize metrics in the near term that have widely available data related to Advanced Coursework Sequences and High School Graduation.	K-12 leads
	Determine what metrics can be tracked and shared with intermediary and K-12 system partners at the student level for Post-High School Education and Employment, Credentials of Value, and Workforce and Economic Mobility.	Postsecondary and workforce partners lead
	Leverage data collected in college and career readiness platforms (e.g., Maia, Naviance CCLR, Overgrad, SchoolLinks, Xello), other systems used to track ICAPs, and any additional relevant datasets to measure High-Quality Advising and Career-Connected Learning.	K-12 leads, postsecondary and workforce partners consulted
	Use data collected in current student surveys for high school students to measure Purpose, Belonging, and Social Capital.	K-12 leads

Implementation roadmap

Phase 2 – Scale		
Key activities	**Suggested concrete steps**	**Sector(s) responsible**
Expand data collection and reporting	Implement and/or adjust college and career readiness platforms to track ICAPs and measure participation and the quality of High-Quality Advising and Career-Connected Learning.	K-12 leads, workforce partners consulted
	Develop a more comprehensive student survey strategy around college and career pathways for high school students to report on Programmatic Experiences and the Cultivation of Agency. This would likely include a combination of existing student surveys, the adoption of new third-party questions/scales, and, potentially, the development of new survey scales/questions.	K-12 leads
	Extend data collection to comprehensively report on high school transitions and long-term success metrics related to Post-High School Education and Employment, Credentials of Value, and Workforce and Economic Mobility and shared with intermediary and K-12 system partners at the student level.	Postsecondary and workforce partners lead
	Determine what data are already available at the state or regional level to expand reporting across the measurement framework and expand data-sharing agreements with partners as new metrics become available from sector partners.	Intermediary leads
Leverage data for shared ownership	Develop initial public dashboards that report on as many currently available student-centered measures as possible.	Intermediary leads
	Collaborate with K-12 system partners to better understand the challenges that students face across transitions and help cross-system leaders make data-informed decisions to address those challenges.	Postsecondary and workforce partners lead
	Support the development of regional and state cross-sector accountability systems.	Intermediary leads

Implementation roadmap

Phase 3 – Sustain		
Key activities	**Suggested concrete steps**	**Sector(s) responsible**
Continue to expand reporting and transparency	Report on the integration of Programmatic Experiences and the Cultivation of Agency at the student level.	K-12 leads
	Enhance public dashboards to report on all 11 student-centered measures.	Intermediary leads
	Support the development and/or expansion of P-20 longitudinal data systems to more effectively track the student journey across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce.	Intermediary leads
Use data to drive cross–sector collaboration	Support the development and/or expansion of state efforts to report on credentials of value, particularly nondegree credentials of value.	Postsecondary and workforce partners lead
	Engage more proactively with K-12 system leaders to align Advanced Coursework Sequences with programs of study that have labor market value and to ensure sufficient opportunities for Career-Connected Learning.	Postsecondary and workforce partners lead
	Continuously assess student outcomes to inform ongoing pathways design and other decisionmaking.	Intermediary leads with K-12, postsecondary, and workforce partners

Learn more about purposeful pathways

All high school students should have access to purposeful pathways—regardless of where they are getting started or where they want to go. Readers are encouraged to explore the full Commission report and accompanying action guides to learn more.

- *A Launchpad for Life:* introduces the vision for purposeful pathways, the evidence behind the programmatic experiences, and the cultivation of agency. Includes galvanizing recommendations for K-12, higher education, workforce, and intermediary leaders to implement and scale purposeful pathways in their communities.

- *High-Impact Practices Action Guide:* Introduces a set of high-impact practices that illustrate different approaches to integrate and build coherence across programmatic experiences and cultivation of agency.

- *Enabling Conditions Action Guide*: Explores five enabling conditions to support, sustain, and scale purposeful pathways at the local, regional, and state levels.

- *Pursuing Purpose: A Playbook for Meaningful Student Engagement:* This resource, produced by Big Picture Learning and young adult commissioners, equips school and system leaders with strategies to co-design with youth to ensure pathways are relevant and responsive to students' needs.

Acknowledgments

Bibliography

CATEGORY	REFERENCE
Programmatic experiences	- **College Access: Research & Action (CARA), & Savitz-Romer, M. (2023).** High quality college and career advising.
Cultivation of agency	- **Charania, M., & Freeland Fisher, J. (2020, July).** The missing metrics: Emerging practices for measuring students' relationships and networks. Christensen Institute. - **Education Strategy Group. (2024).** Cultivating connections: The current state of social capital in college and career pathways. - **Freeland Fisher, J. (2025, September 5).** People indicators are progress indicators: Advancing social capital skills and access in education. Student Upward Mobility Initiative. - **Motivate Lab. (n.d.).** Measuring learning mindsets. Navigate Project.
High school transition	- **Belfield, C. R., Jenkins, D., & Fink, J. (2019, July).** Early momentum metrics: Leading indicators for community college improvement. (CCRC Research Brief). Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. - **Hyslop, A.** (2025, July). Let's measure ready: A 50-state analysis of college, career, military, and civic readiness indicators. Urban Institute & All4Ed. - **Jobs for the Future. (2025).** The American job quality study. 2025 state of the U.S. labor force.
Long-Term Success	- **Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (2025).** Living Wage Calculator. - **OECD. (2025).** Education at a glance 2025: OECD indicators. - **SCORE. (2024, October).** Connecting education & opportunity: A framework for credential impact in Tennessee. - **Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (2025, January 23).** Credentials of value methodology.
Cross-cutting	- **Blagg, K. (2025, July).** Which college and career readiness standards best align with positive outcomes after high school? Urban Institute. - **Reyna, R. & Norton, L. (2020).** From tails to heads: Building momentum for postsecondary success. Education Strategy Group. - **Furtado, K., & Reeves, M. (2025, July).** How states can encourage economic mobility by improving how they measure college and career readiness: A summary of current measurement challenges and how to solve them. Urban Institute. - **StriveTogether. (2021).** A guide to racial and ethnic equity systems indicators.