

Conceiving Regional Pathways to Prosperity Systems

Ronald F. Ferguson

From: Perna, Laura W. (Ed.). 2013. *Preparing Today's Students for Tomorrow's Jobs in Metropolitan America*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Copyright © 2013 University of Pennsylvania Press.

Reprinted by permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press.

CHAPTER 9

Conceiving Regional Pathways to Prosperity Systems

Ronald F. Ferguson

Since its inception, our nation has undergone several major phases in the collective responsibility we assume for our young. Initially, education was a private affair. Indeed, it took a century to achieve broad agreement that government should be responsible for schooling (Tyack 1974). Thomas Jefferson proposed the idea soon after the American Revolution. He understood that citizens would under-invest in education because they would fail to consider the full societal benefits. Gradually over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Americans came to agree with Jefferson.

By the middle of the twentieth century, state and local governments across the nation had accepted responsibility for educating children. Every healthy child in America was required to attend school at least through eighth grade. High school graduation was the primary goal, since a stable middle-class lifestyle was achievable in the 1950s and 1960s for high school graduates.

Now, half a century later, high school graduation is no longer sufficient. Anthony Carnevale and his coauthors demonstrate in this volume that most jobs that pay a living wage require more than a high school degree. A consensus is developing that young people from every segment of the society and every region of the nation should complete high school and then undergo additional certification for the world of work.

Unfortunately, our system is underdeveloped. School-to-career arrangements are often like street systems with potholes, detours, dead ends, and missing road signs. Too frequently, young people get lost in the maze. Then they arrive in early adulthood lacking the skills and orientations to exercise

the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and to succeed in jobs that pay living, middle-class wages.

If we can agree on the basic proposition that all youth should complete high school and that most should earn some form of postsecondary certification in order to become career ready, then the challenge before us is to conceive and implement the institutional arrangements—the Pathways to Prosperity systems—that are required. The time has come for the next great leap forward in the collective responsibility we assume for our young.

Despite the quite laudable “college for all” movement that has become ubiquitous in schools and the media over the past few years, our current pathways system is working poorly for youth who lack the skills or desire to achieve four-year college degrees. Huge numbers of American youth reach late adolescence unfamiliar with the mainstream world of work, not headed to college, and with no understanding of the pathways by which they might transition from adolescence into productive adulthood. By the time they reach their late twenties, less than a third of young adults have four-year college degrees, and only about 40 percent have any type of postsecondary degree. Even if we doubled the percentage with college degrees, which is unlikely in the near-term future, there would still be millions needing alternatives that are poorly developed in the current system.

As other chapters in this volume argue, pretending that all youth are headed for college success is unfair to young people for whom other options would be better. Of course, one could argue that high schools are not designed to prepare all students for college, that traditional tracking, grading, and curriculum structures were designed for the very purpose of preparing only a select few students for higher education (Tyack 1974). Farrington and Small (2008: 5) assert that prospects for realizing the college for all goal are limited by “[h]undred-year-old structural mechanisms designed to draw academic distinctions among students” for the purpose of sorting some students into college and others into the blue-collar labor market. Certainly, we should oppose any forces that are pushing students away from preparing for college when college would be their best option. However, we should also oppose the practice of pushing students toward college when other postsecondary options might fit them better and offer superior prospects for success. Admittedly, there are risks. But students and their families should have multiple pathways from which to choose.

This chapter is fundamentally about system design. It builds upon the *Pathways to Prosperity* report (Symonds, Schwartz, and Ferguson 2011) that

my colleagues and I at the Harvard Graduate School of Education released in February 2011. That report proposed that the United States needs a more complete, high-quality pathways system with multiple pathways, expanded roles for employers, and a compact with youth. It gave examples from European nations that are ahead of the United States in how well they prepare their youth for careers.

Central to the design of a pathways system should be a scaffolded sequence of work- and career-related learning experiences. That sequence should begin in late elementary school, around the fifth grade, and should continue through young adulthood. Employers and other adult organizations, including religious and civic groups, should play a much greater role than they currently do in cooperation with schools and other institutions. The chapter outlines ten strategic threads of a Pathways to Prosperity strategy to mobilize our collective will and build our capacity to prepare more young people for success in the twenty-first century.

A Twenty-First-Century Social Contract

To achieve these reforms, we need a new social contract that defines public and private sector roles and responsibilities in a Pathways to Prosperity system for youth. The urgency of developing such a system is increasing as our population shifts toward a mix in which people of color, many of whom are poorly served by current arrangements, become the majority of the nation's electorate and workforce. Multiple high-quality navigable pathways to prosperity are needed to prepare youth from all racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds for success as parents, citizens, and workers. With this kind of comprehensive, "positive youth development" aspiration in mind, the Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth (2002) proposed a new social compact to provide the following types of youth development experiences:

- physical and psychological safety;
- structure;
- supportive relationships with adults;
- social opportunities to belong;
- positive social norms;
- skill building opportunities;

- community networking opportunities; and
- opportunities to practice new skills.

These are the features of positive youth development systems. All young people deserve these experiences in all of the formal and informal settings where they learn and grow, but especially in their homes, schools, religious institutions, and workplaces.

The greatest and most challenging reforms will entail new commitments to legions of underprepared and disconnected young people who either fail to complete high school or complete high school without the wherewithal to connect with the world of work or postsecondary learning. These youth are disproportionately children of color, but Whites are amply represented as well. Young people in this category often have few marketable skills, few social network resources to expose and connect them to opportunities, and few supports to help them succeed on the job if and when they are fortunate enough to become employed. Accordingly, their unmet needs include marketable skills, information about their options, financial assistance, and ongoing supports to help them navigate the transition from adolescence into adulthood. For some youth, families can supply these resources. But for many millions—perhaps half the youth of the nation—family supports and resources are not enough.

I regard the pathways challenge and social contract to be aspects of a larger social movement. I call it the movement for excellence with equity (Ferguson 2008). Although they may be messy conglomerations, all successful movements contain distinct goals, strategies, policies, programs, projects, principles, and practices. Inside the broader movement, the pathways goal is that young people should begin identifying “possible selves” and career options as early as late elementary school and commence moving along experiential pathways that interest them. As they learn more about options and move through middle and high school and into postsecondary education or training, they should narrow their focus and successfully transition into the adult world of work. Supported by the business community and various other organizations, such a sequence of experiences might play out along the following timeline:

- Grades five and six: Businesses and other institutions authorize and enable their employees to visit fifth- and sixth-grade classrooms where they tell their life stories, beginning when they were

the children's ages.¹ Registries of schools and visitors are organized to maintain this system at scale.

- Grades seven and eight: A few times during the school year, students take field trips to employment sites and go behind the scenes in organizations that they might otherwise never see or imagine. Information about careers and the world of work are integrated into these experiences and also into the core curriculum at school.
- Grades nine and ten: Employers authorize, encourage, and enable employees to visit schools to help counsel youth concerning career preparation. Young people are invited individually or in small groups to visit employment sites that interest them. Information about careers and the world of work becomes more deeply integrated into the core curriculum at school. Career and technical elements are routinely available in the high school curriculum, with participation depending on skill and interest.
- Grades eleven and twelve: Options for combining paid work and learning expand greatly. Schools work with employers to integrate work and learning, especially for youth not skilled or interested enough to make four-year college the best near-term choice. Employers loan employees to supplement the career counseling that schools provide.
- Grades thirteen and fourteen: High-quality workforce preparation programs in community colleges and other institutions work closely with employers to help youth develop marketable skills, logistical knowledge, and networks of contacts. Registries track youth for several years after training in order to document their experiences, diagnose the need for additional supports, and identify ways to refine the system.
- Grades fifteen and sixteen: Youth who chose to do so have accumulated enough basic education courses to enable them to move along to four-year colleges. Others move into the adult world of work.

Organizing and maintaining a system with these features is no simple task. Figure 9.1 provides a template of system components, featuring senior power brokers who use their influence to put the system in place. Public sector systems will be important—for example, we need publicly funded entitlements for post-high school education and training. However, what the public

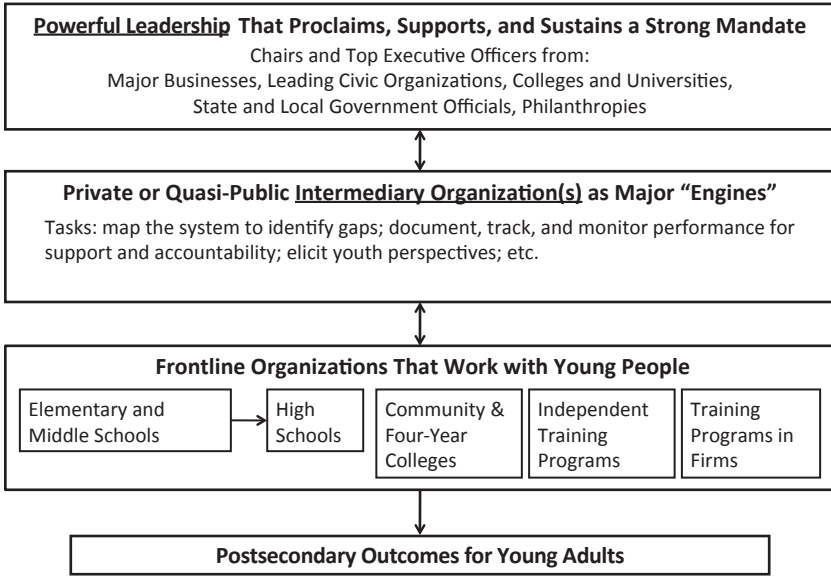


Figure 9.1. Key elements of a regional pathways system.

sector can achieve will be insufficient without expanded roles for private sector organizations.

Together, public and private sector leaders need to ensure that the tasks outlined above are performed more routinely and more effectively. The system needs to support a variety of roles in the types of intermediary organizations that Figure 9.1 envisions:

- system developers—public and private sector organizations that help build capacity and maintain quality. These organizations assist education and training institutions with funding, curriculum, professional development, staff recruitment, and so on.
- system regulators and monitors—public and private sector organizations that set rules for the delivery of particular types of services, monitor performance, and hold institutions accountable.
- businesses and associated intermediaries that help build and support the system—private sector organizations that help identify labor market trends, develop curricula for schools and training

organizations, provide internships, assist with instruction at particular education or training sites, and provide problem solving supports to help young workers succeed on the job.

The current system has within it a range of education and youth development organizations that support young people through key age-and-stage transitions beginning in early adolescence. They could be better integrated in a well-functioning system. They include

For Early- to Middle-Adolescence Transitions

- extended families
- middle schools
- out-of-school time programs
- religious institutions

For Middle- to Late-Adolescence Transitions

- comprehensive high schools
- career and technical high schools
- alternative high schools
- second chance programs (Job Corps, YouthBuild, Year Up, others)
- employers that hire high-school-aged youth into internships

For Late-Adolescence to Early-Adulthood Transitions

- community colleges
- technical colleges
- postsecondary apprenticeship programs
- four-year colleges and graduate schools
- the military
- employers who hire young adults

All of these entities play important roles in every region of the nation. They need to be integrated into a well-functioning pathways system.

Need for a More Elaborate System

The following pages present ten strategic threads that are important for developing robust and sustainable systems of pathways in states and metropolitan

regions. Each thread represents a feature of effective systems that leaders need to understand and take into account as they re-conceive local systems. Exactly how leaders incorporate these threads into their strategies will need to be tailored to the specific resources and relationship patterns that have grown out of each region's distinctive history.

Thread #1: Powerful Leadership

Initiating and sustaining the institutional structures we need requires high level, powerful leadership drawn from the top ranks of major corporations, universities, and governmental organizations. The most effective people combine passion with competence, and also have the wherewithal to attract other powerful people to join forces with them. Such people have the authority to set priorities and allocate institutional resources without asking permission. Others understand that there are benefits to cooperating with such people, and penalties for resisting. These are people with the name recognition, skills, and personalities to effectively cultivate both a sense of urgency and a sense of possibility. They have major influence on resource flows and strong records of past accomplishment.

For example, Orrin Ingram, CEO of Ingram Industries Inc., and Tom Cigarran, CEO of Healthways, Inc., are prominent Nashville businessmen. In 2004, they spent \$700,000 of their own funds to found a nonprofit organization named "Alignment Nashville." Their purpose was to align the priorities of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS), local businesses, and the region's nonprofits (Hess and Downs 2011). The business, education, and nonprofit leaders that Alignment Nashville convened agreed that MNPS was not preparing students well enough for the twenty-first-century economy. They identified a lack of educational relevance for high school students as a key problem, concluding that "school needed to look more like real life" (Hess and Downs 2011: 24). Mobilizing quickly, staff from Alignment Nashville, the Nashville Chamber of Commerce, and the Mayor's office helped MNPS draft a grant application for a U.S. Department of Education Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) program. Their successful application brought in over \$6 million for SLCs based on the career academy model.

Nashville now has 12 academy high schools that operate two to five career academies each. The district boasts a total of 46 academies and 117

business-academy partnerships (Sparks 2011). Indeed, a theme in the successful grant application was that local business and civic leaders would remain engaged (Hess and Downs 2011). The Alignment Nashville high school committee has six industry-linked partnership councils with business representation. The councils “advise MNPS of significant trends in the industries, assist in the development of new academies, and connect MNPS with potential partners and resources” (Hess and Downs 2011: 29). A key feature of these arrangements is that Alignment Nashville invited only people with executive power in their home organizations to serve on the partnership councils.

Another example built on powerful leadership is Strive, based in Cincinnati and northern Kentucky. Its declared purpose is to “develop the best educational system in the world from preschool through college” and “ensure that every student in the region succeeds” (University of Cincinnati 2006). Its senior leadership includes local school superintendents, college presidents, elected officials, civic leaders, and other executives from education, business, and nonprofit sectors.

The person most responsible for pulling leaders together for Strive was Nancy L. Zimpher, then president of the University of Cincinnati. One person told us, “People would show up just because she asked and expected them to do so.” A press release from the University of Cincinnati on August 18, 2006, has the heading “President Launches ‘Strive’ Educational Partnership” (University of Cincinnati 2006). It shows President Zimpher with her arms outstretched in front of a group of other education, business, and political leaders that she had helped convene for the launch.

Thread #2: Instigators

Instigators are people who work, often behind the scenes and with limited formal authority, to plant seeds of change and to propose and refine the ideas that effective leaders then promote. Indeed, many of the people who may read this chapter will be instigators. Learning details about the roles that instigators play can be difficult because their effectiveness often depends on their remaining in the shadows, supporting others who make the announcements and take the credit. Nonetheless, the instigators are the idea people. Their ideas become critically important catalysts for the work that others carry forward.

Potential instigators may not realize that this is a role that they can play. They may underestimate the value of communicating their ideas in forms that others can understand, appreciate, and pass along. Researchers constitute a prime category of potential instigators. Through their work in think tanks and universities they have access to a broad range of ideas and intellectual resources. They often have the skills to organize ideas in useful ways. Further, they may have the scheduling flexibility to participate in working groups of instigators that distill and refine the concepts around which others will later organize. Instigators contribute ideas that people with power help bring to fruition.

One especially prolific instigating force related to the Pathways to Prosperity agenda is the Berkeley-based organization ConnectEd: The California Center for College and Career. Established in 2006 through a grant from the James Irvine Foundation, ConnectEd supports the development and dissemination of Linked Learning, a high school improvement approach that creates “programs of study that connect learning in the classroom with real-world applications outside of school” (<http://www.irvine.org>). Each high school student in a Linked Learning program pursues a “pathway” that “connects strong academics with real-world experience”—a comprehensive study that integrates “rigorous academic instruction with a demanding technical curriculum and field-based learning—all set in the context of one of California’s 15 major industry sectors” (<http://www.irvine.org>).

ConnectEd builds awareness of the Linked Learning approach through the publications, videos, and other resources on its website, <http://www.connectedcalifornia.org>. In addition, it publishes research on the social and economic benefits of Linked Learning. ConnectEd instigated the Linked Learning Alliance, a statewide coalition of education, industry, and community organizations committed to transforming the way California’s high schools operate.²

Thread #3: Highly Skilled and Dedicated Staff in Powerful “Engines”

Pathways systems need powerful organizations—I like to call them “engines”—that drive the change process and help sustain the scope and quality of the system’s ongoing work. Strive and Alignment Nashville aspire

to become engines. A key feature of engines is that they are *not* frontline organizations working directly with youth and families. Instead, their role is to support and hold accountable the organizations that work directly with youth and families. In addition, they should monitor the mix of organizations doing frontline work to ascertain that they are well matched to the region's needs and have the capacity to perform effectively. Threads 4 through 10 below describe some of the functions that engines should perform.

Perhaps the most essential quality of successful engines is that their staffs are skilled and dedicated enough to play their roles effectively. They need to be at least as skilled and talented as the vast majority of people in the organizations with which they interact. They also need courage. Their main functions entail, on the one hand, helping people and organizations to achieve things that they could not have achieved on their own, and on the other hand, holding them accountable for keeping their promises and playing their roles well. Of course, engines may divide these functions across multiple actors or departments; and there may be multiple engines, each of which specializes in particular functions. The point is that the engines perform vital system-building and maintenance functions.

My view is that engines need to be private sector organizations in order to protect them from control by elected officials. If the pathways system becomes too identified with one political party or too embroiled in partisan politics, the broad support that it needs from the employer community and from all political parties might be undermined. The best way to address this challenge is unclear. Perhaps the main engines should be quasi-public organizations with boards appointed jointly by public and private sector leaders, and staffs held strictly accountable to those boards. In the end, what matters most is that they are professionally operated organizations with clearly defined duties and that they perform extremely well in service to the pathways mission.

Thread #4: Clear Central Themes That Provide Focus

Enlisting and sustaining participation by employers and other stakeholders requires having a few central themes that people can wrap their minds around and not be overwhelmed. By "themes," I mean compelling facts and ideas concerning the urgency of the work, and pertaining to the structures and routines needed to establish and maintain an effectively operating system of

pathways to prosperity. These compelling facts and ideas continually remind people why they are making the required sacrifices.

There are many ways to frame the central themes. In Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, Strive's framers crafted "the Strive Promise." It focuses on what leaders called "five key goals and initial strategies." The five are

1. *Every child will be **prepared** for school from birth through early childhood education.* United Way of Greater Cincinnati's Success By 6 initiative will lead efforts to ensure every child is prepared for and has access to high-quality early childhood programs.
2. *Every child will be **supported inside and outside the school walls.*** Resources, programs, and services that support students and families will be coordinated at the district and school levels through the creation of schools as Community Learning Centers and Family Resource Centers. These will provide expanded academic enrichment opportunities for children along with such services as youth development activities, art, music, and recreation programs and counseling.
3. *Every child will **succeed academically.*** Existing teacher training and professional development programs will be aligned and improved to attract and retain the most talented and committed educators to Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky.
4. *Every student will **enroll** in some form of postsecondary education.* Financial barriers to college will be eliminated and trained adults will provide guidance to students to raise their aspirations and enable them to apply to and be accepted in an institution that meets their career objectives.
5. *Every student will **graduate and enter a career.*** Colleges will provide comprehensive student support services, especially to first-generation students, and expand co-op opportunities (Cincinnati Public Schools 2011).

Note that the fourth of these is central to the pathways agenda.

Generating effective central themes to drive the development of a Pathways to Prosperity system requires avoiding what Keith Westrich, Director of College and Career Readiness at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, calls "third-rail" words.³ He warns us that the phrase "vocational education" incites opposition from stakeholders

who worry about racial and social class biases in past educational tracking practices. Westrich reminds us of the need to be clear that college and career readiness is a *both/and*—not an *either/or*—proposition, a crucial emphasis echoed in the first guiding principle of Linked Learning: “Pathways prepare students for postsecondary education *and* career—both objectives, not just one or the other” (ConnectEd; italics in original). The success of any movement to build a regional Pathways to Prosperity system will depend upon the careful use of language.

In Massachusetts, the crafting of messages has taken a promising form in a recently released report from the Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board (MWIB), entitled *Preparing Youth for Work and Learning in the 21st Century Economy* (MWIB 2010). The report marks the culmination of an effort of the MWIB Youth Committee that began in 2007 in response to a gubernatorial directive. Their charge was to assess the existing youth employment system and recommend improvements. The report asserts the following vision: “All youth develop the 21st century academic and professional skills critical to career success in our evolving economy. Secondary and postsecondary credentials are an important part of this vision which applies to both in-school and out-of-school youth” (MWIB 2010: 5).

The report then breaks down the vision into three explicit recommendations, each accompanied by action steps to guide policy and implementation. The three recommendations are

1. Increase the number and quality of work experiences and career exploration activities for both in-school and out-of-school youth.
2. Organize collaboration among education, workforce, and human service agencies at both the state and regional levels.
3. Pilot a “multiple pathways” approach in selected regions that combines the education, workforce development, and human service support necessary to address the state’s dropout crisis by creating new avenues to educational attainment, economic security, and upward mobility for all youth (MWIB 2010: 5).

These are very general statements. Nonetheless, they are clear statements around which stakeholders can organize to make progress toward achieving the pathways vision.

Thread #5: Streamlined and Coherent “Curriculum” for the Change Process

Building a Pathways to Prosperity system will require giving stakeholders clear images of the roles that the system needs them to play. People in many cases will need to play roles for which they have not been prepared—they will need to do things that they have never seen done. Therefore we need materials to help stakeholders understand their roles and learn to play them.

ConnectEd has organized resources on its website into a comprehensive ToolKit—a portfolio of resources to help guide stakeholders in designing and implementing high quality Linked Learning pathways (<http://www.connectedcalifornia.org/landing>). The ConnectEd ToolKit offers a navigable collection of publications, videos, links to external resources, and upcoming professional development sessions structured around four essential elements: pathway design, engaged learning, system support, and evaluation and accountability. Importantly, the four elements that comprise the ToolKit match the four organizing principles of the Certification Criteria for Linked Learning Pathways, discussed below. This consistency of language and structure enhance coherence and render the ToolKit more accessible and actionable.

The first component of the ConnectEd ToolKit, Pathway Design, contains a wealth of resources to guide the process of designing quality pathways “with a structure, governance, and program of study that provides all students with opportunities for both postsecondary and career success” (<http://www.connectedcalifornia.org/base/toolkits/index/area:1>). Also included in the Pathway Design module is an Advisory Board Manual, which describes how to operate a business and community advisory board as a key aspect of pathway design.

Second in the ConnectEd ToolKit is the Engaged Learning section, which addresses the difficult work of creating pathways curricula with the requisite levels of rigor in both academic and technical learning standards. Integrating such complex instructional strategies presents a significant challenge, so it is not surprising that the Engaged Learning module is the most resource-rich section of the ConnectEd ToolKit. The section includes guidance for developing work-based learning experiences along with preparation for postsecondary options, representative of the approach’s balanced emphasis on both college and career.

The third piece of the ToolKit, System Support, discusses district-level policies and practices that cultivate an authorizing environment in which

quality pathways can thrive. The System Support model emphasizes leadership and human capital considerations for successful implementation of quality pathways and for long-term sustainability.

The final section addresses Evaluation and Accountability, outlining practices to ensure that a pathway is in fact improving student outcomes. The module also addresses how to use data to drive continuous improvement of a pathway by tracking students through formalized postsecondary follow-up practices.

Impressive as it is, the ConnectEd example represents only a narrow slice of what we mean by a curriculum for the change process. It pertains to one program, not the whole system. Stakeholders in other parts of the system will benefit from similar supports, many of which remain to be designed.

Thread #6: Organizational Structures with the Capacity to Teach and Motivate Adults

The pathways system needs routines and structures inside various public, private, and nonprofit institutions that help people to learn their roles—including but not limited to roles as teachers, trainers, and supervisors—and to feel motivated to play them effectively. The system needs mechanisms for coaching, observing, and sharing that make it difficult for individuals in key positions to avoid participating in the change process.

For example, when Strive in Cincinnati focused on improving outcomes for youth in the K–12 system, it created a structure for learning. Each participating organization was assigned to one of fifteen different Student Success Networks (SSNs), with each network defined by a particular type of activity, such as tutoring or early childhood education. According to Kania and Kramer (2011: 36), “Each SSN has been meeting with coaches and facilitators for two hours every two weeks for the past three years, developing shared performance indicators, discussing their progress, and most important, learning from each other and aligning their efforts to support each other.” Because almost all of the local funders in the region require their grantees to participate in Strive, it is difficult for participating organizations to stand aside and avoid the learning.

Similarly, recall the career academies program that stakeholders collaborated to create in Nashville. Teachers needed new skills to play the roles that the academies required. According to Hess and Downs (2011), the Nashville

Chamber of Commerce helped match teachers with local businesses for “externships” and arranged stipends. The Chamber, a business organization called PENCIL, and Alignment Nashville each assigned staff to help organize meetings and coordinate participation of the business community in helping adults to learn the roles they would need to play to make the career academies successful.

Thread #7: Patient but Tough Accountability

The system needs tools and routines for monitoring practices and outcomes, targeting assistance where needed, sometimes replacing people or organizations that fail to improve.

Accountability will operate differently depending on whether the actors are in for-profit firms, governmental organizations, or nonprofit organizations. For nonprofit organizations, funders have a key role to play. In the case of Strive, for example, most Cincinnati area funders have aligned their criteria for evaluating grantees. As a result, no matter who their funders might be, organizations know that their performances can be easily compared against other organizations that play similar roles and provide similar services. Funders as a group can track progress on particular metrics for the region as a whole, and they can identify which of their grantees are contributing (or not contributing) to the observed trends.

Accountability in for-profit firms and governmental organizations will need to operate through normal channels. Boards of directors and executive officers will need to be clear with employees concerning the expectations and rewards that go along with participating in the pathways system. Forms in which employees might serve and support the pathways system are many, ranging from volunteer activities on the one hand, to assignments carried out as formal duties on the other.

No matter which sector they represent, people who control resources in a regional pathways system need to make it clear that results matter. They need to make sure that performances are monitored, that people and organizations needing remedial support to improve actually receive the support that they need, and that continuing support depends upon demonstrated improvement.

Thread #8: Institutionalized Data Gathering, Including Data from Young People

There should be mechanisms for gathering and organizing data, including a regional registry for young people who choose to have their progress tracked and to benefit from associated information or counseling services. Information could be collected on schooling status, job status, and academic or career credentials achieved or desired. Youth could report on the places they applied for work and the responses they received. They might also register their career aspirations, extracurricular interests, and job preferences. Personal and group identifiers might include age, years of formal schooling, disability status, English as a second language status, race/ethnicity, gender, and others.

Kania and Kramer (2011) describe how what they call *collective impact* initiatives should use data to achieve alignment. They write, “Collecting data and measuring results consistently on a short list of indicators at the community level and across all participating organizations not only ensures that all efforts remain aligned, it also enables the participants to hold each other accountable and learn from each other’s successes and failures.” As an example, they describe how all of the preschool programs in Strive use the same measures to track results. Analysis of those results led to a new project that effectively reduced summer learning loss in the months leading up to kindergarten. Benefits of collecting common data extend beyond just preschool programs. Kania and Kramer report, “Each type of activity requires a different set of measures, but all organizations engaged in the same type of activity report on the same measures. Looking at results across multiple organizations enables the participants to spot patterns, find solutions, and implement them rapidly” (Kania and Kramer 2011: 40).

Thread #9: Data-Driven Decision Making and Transparency

In order for data to be useful, mechanisms must be in place to use it. A well-functioning regional pathways system should include analysts to track trends in strategically important indicators and to produce reports tailored for busy decision makers. The data for tracking trends should come from many sources, not just the regional registry outlined above. Decision-making

groups in the pathways system should be encouraged to specify the types of analyses they need for making their decisions. Their requests should influence both the types of data collected and the types of analyses produced.

There should be a “dashboard” maintained on a public website where anyone who wants to know can track the progress on featured goals. Goals could be defined by age group. Dashboard entries might show, for example, the percentages of youth in the region being reached with career-exposure experiences appropriate for their ages.

In addition, career-exposure programs and projects might be developed in response to the interests expressed in registry entries. Or imagine that the youth registry tracked the types of reasons employers gave when turning young people down for jobs. A pathways system could create mechanisms for working with employers and young people to design ways of overcoming the problems thus identified, in order to make good job matches. Similarly, if identifiable problems seemed repeatedly to result in quits or fires, those might become the focus of professional development for frontline supervisors, to prepare them to work with young employees more effectively across a particular sector of the economy.

A major emphasis of our Pathways to Prosperity report was that regions need ways of integrating work and learning from high school through post-secondary levels. This integration will require rethinking curricula and designing supports to help young people choose pathways to pursue. There will surely be imbalances, with excess demand for some opportunities and excess supply for others. A major challenge is to design and implement the pathways system in ways that fairly and transparently allocate opportunity, especially across segments of the community representing different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status groups.

Transparency is important because many people do not trust the traditional mechanisms. Each segment of the community will have their antennae up to detect favoritism or disrespect. Less advantaged groups or communities of color will worry that the system is tracking their children toward the most menial opportunities and hoarding the best opportunities for Whites or for the children of the well-to-do. Even between different nonwhite groups, say, Hispanics and Blacks, there may be sensitivities concerning whether one group or the other is being favored by particular decision-making processes. Transparency can help allay such concerns.

Thread #10: Community Involvement and Resources

Leaders in a Pathways to Prosperity system should engage a broad range of stakeholders. It is important initially for a small group to take the lead in order to assemble resources and set things in motion. Some core defining features must be nonnegotiable. But success requires much broader participation. Leaders need to strike a balance so that all key stakeholder groups feel included and respected.

For example, the top-down nature of Strive's introduction ignited some criticism. In a recent interview conducted for this chapter, Strive Executive Committee Chair Kathy Merchant opined,

When it comes to stakeholders, it is important to make it a grassroots, not a grass-tops movement. We call ourselves an overseeing body, the executive committee. I prefer to call it a committee of executives to keep it more of a social movement than a rigid hierarchy. These are the leaders in the community who hold the levers of change. They can make things happen without going through others. . . . [But] we have a weakness in engaging others like parents at the grassroots level. We are back-filling now because there is a point of tension with some in the community feeling, "They have done this 'to us' instead of 'with us.'" The inclusion question is important.

Merchant's perspective here is understandable, given her position as the leader of Strive's core intermediary organization. After all, one aspect of her job to is to engage people from all levels of the community and convince them that their views are respected and influential. At the same time, it would be a mistake to believe that so much change would be brewing in the region without powerful leaders having decided to just do it—just make it happen!

Power matters. But there is a division of roles that needs to be understood. As the system-building process matures, influence should become more widely shared. Stakeholders should have opportunities to present their views and debate competing perspectives. Tensions will be inevitable as pressures are exerted from the top down, middle out, and bottom up. If a critical mass of stakeholders at any level of the system becomes too dissatisfied, prospects for success will be greatly diminished. Conversely, if a broad

cross section of the community sees progress and the region develops a strong sense of efficacy surrounding its Pathways to Prosperity system, success becomes sustainable.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Social and economic vitality in twenty-first-century America may depend more than we want to acknowledge on how good a system we build for school-to-career transitions. In too many instances, our school-to-career system resembles a road system with dead-end streets, potholes, and roads to nowhere. For some youth, we have an interstate highway system leading to four-year college graduation, but many youth lack the interest or wherewithal to travel that road. In contrast, many other parts of the system are in disrepair and difficult to navigate. There, young people who search for roads to success often get lost for years. This is unfair. We need a well-maintained and navigable system for all youth, not only some youth.

This chapter concerns how states and metropolitan regions can provide better pathways to prosperity for adolescents and young adults. Around the time of fifth grade, we should introduce children to the amazing variety of careers and “possible selves” to be considered as they think about their futures. Then, without constraining their choices, we should provide a sequence of career-related learning opportunities until they join the workforce as young adults in the careers that they have chosen.

To create and sustain the pathways system that this chapter envisions, highly influential stakeholders who lead major institutions in business and government will need to spearhead support for key intermediary institutions, which we have called “engines.” These essential leaders are people with name recognition who have the power to direct resources, and the skills and personalities to cultivate not only a sense of urgency, but also a sense of possibility. They may rely for some of their best ideas on people that we call “instigators,” some of whom have no formal authority and will never get the credit. Informed by instigators and driven by their conviction that the work is important, dominant leaders of major institutions need to set up organizations that serve as engines. The engines are not direct service providers. Instead, they play system-building and support roles for other organizations. They need to employ highly talented staffers to help organize, support, and assure the quality of the critically important work upon which this chapter has focused.

We also need a change of mindset. There was a time in American history when multiple pathways into the workforce served clearly discriminatory purposes. They were designed to transport some youth into the most pleasant and lucrative employment opportunities, while channeling others into the dirtiest and lowest-paying alternatives. Privileged segments of our population were favored because of their racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds, and others were restricted to the lowest rungs of the economic system. Measured skills were different between groups because of historical differences in opportunities to learn. In too many cases, those differences were used as excuses for favoring one group over another in hiring decisions, even when the skills were irrelevant for performing the jobs.

Today, academic skills still correlate highly with family background characteristics. However, more than in the past, academic skills really do translate into economic productivity.⁴ So, in the interest of equity, closing academic achievement gaps between students from different family backgrounds remains my greatest preoccupation.⁵ Academic achievement gaps perpetuate economic opportunity gaps.

But achievement gaps are only part of the problem. We should be honest with ourselves about the reasons that job market outcomes are so much worse for some youths than for others. Our unwillingness or inability to cope effectively with disparity has caused us to under-develop school-to-career supports for a large segment of our youth population. We have been in denial about the need to identify youths for whom the traditional four-year college is probably not a good fit and to help them identify alternative roads to career success. And let us be clear that these youth do not come only from less-advantaged households. The fact is that parents from all walks of life, including many of us who have highly successful business careers or teach at elite universities, have children for whom four-year colleges are not the best options.

When I hear the “college for all” slogan, I think four-year college. Some of my valued colleagues want the phrase to connote all types of post-high school career preparation. Whatever the semantics we ultimately settle upon for the meaning of the word “college,” let us agree that all youth deserve multiple career pathways from which to choose and high quality supports for making their choices. To make this happen, every one of us can be an instigator, and some can do much more.

Notes

I would like to thank my colleagues Robert Schwartz and William Symonds for helpful conversations. The ideas expressed in this chapter have evolved over the period that we have worked together on the Pathways to Prosperity project. Of course, neither Schwartz nor Symonds is responsible for any flaws in what I have written here. I would also like to thank the students who formed a discussion group and gathered background materials for this project. Lead by Andrew Volkert, that group included John Peirce, Reynaldo Faustino, Jared Joyner, William Johnston, Thomas Santel and Tyler S. Thigpen. Finally, Charlotte Krontiris and Robert Hanna provided helpful editorial support.

1. This recommendation is modeled after a program developed by Patricia Spence of Boston, called “They made it, so can I.” Adults visit fifth-grade classrooms to tell their life stories.

2. Additional information at <http://www.connectedcalifornia.org/alliance>.

3. Personal communication.

4. See Jencks and Phillips 1998.

5. See Ferguson 2008, and the website of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University: <http://www.agi.harvard.edu>.

References

- Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. 2002. *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Edited by Jacquelynne S. Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press.
- Farrington, Camille A., and Margaret H. Small. 2008. *A New Model of Student Assessment for the 21st Century*. Washington, D.C.: American Youth Policy Forum.
- Ferguson, Ronald F. 2008. *Toward Excellence with Equity: An Emerging Vision for Closing the Achievement Gap*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Press.
- Hess, Frederick M., and Whitney Downs. 2011. Partnership is a two-way street: What it takes for business to help drive school reform. Washington, D.C.: Institute for a Competitive Workforce, U.S. Chamber of Commerce. <http://icw.uschamber.com/event/partnership-two-way-street-what-it-takes-business-help-drive-school-reform>.
- Jenks, Christopher, and Meredith Phillips. 1998. *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Press.
- Kania, John, and Mark Kramer. 2011. Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 9(1). http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact.
- Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board (MWIB). 2010. *Preparing Youth for Work and Learning in the 21st Century Economy*. Commonwealth of Massachusetts. http://www.mass.gov/Elwd/docs/mwib/2010_youth_report.pdf.
- Sparks, Sarah D. 2011. Statistics shed light on costs and benefits of career paths. *Education Week, Diplomas Count*, June 9 (June special issue).
- Symonds, William C., Robert B. Schwartz, and Ronald Ferguson. 2011. *Pathways to Prosperity—Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century*. Report issued by the Pathways to Prosperity Project. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Tyack, David. 1974. *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- University of Cincinnati. 2006. President Launches “Strive” Educational Partnership. August 18. (Press release.) www.uc.edu/News/NR.aspx?ID=4258.