



# INSIGHTS

## FROM A PANDEMIC

Reflections from the  
On Track to Career Success Project

© 2023 Everyone Graduates Center at the Center for Social Organization of Schools at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education. All Rights Reserved.

*This manual may contain Internet website IP (Internet Protocol) addresses. At the time this manual was printed, any website and/or email address was checked for both validity and content as it relates to this report's corresponding topic. Johns Hopkins University, and its licensors, are not responsible for any changes in content, IP addresses, pop advertisements, or redirects.*

*This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After extensive planning and work building multiple partnerships, the On Track to Career Success (OTCS) project was launched in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and New Orleans, Louisiana in early 2020. The OTCS project works with partner schools and communities to create a framework to support all students, including the most marginalized, on a path to high school graduation, post-secondary schooling and/or training, and a career with a family-supporting wage.

At about the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic hit and disrupted so much of our lives. Carefully designed plans were pushed aside amid new health restrictions. The next two years were defined by uncertainty and stress, as schools moved to online instruction and then hybrid schooling, forcing educators, nonprofit partners, and community members across the country to reimagine education. Such challenges were perhaps steeper at the OTCS schools, which serve Black, indigenous, and other people of color in historically underserved communities that were among the hardest hit by the pandemic. Many students, teachers, and community members had family members who became seriously ill or died. One potential partner school in New Mexico ended up being converted into a field hospital for its community.

To be certain, the first two years of the OTCS project did not unfold as planned. However, program implementation did proceed — amid the drastically changed education environment — and important lessons emerged that helped move the work forward. Five key insights gleaned from the project's first two years are summarized here and will be of value to educators, funders interested in systemic educational reform, workforce providers, researchers, and others.

### KEY INSIGHTS FROM PANDEMIC IMPLEMENTATION OF OTCS FRAMEWORK

#### 1. Schools Play a Critical Role Connecting Students and Staff — An Essential Building Block for Emotional Well-Being and Success

The pandemic shone a spotlight on the profound impact that the lack of human connection had on students and staff when connections were interrupted. The mental and sometime physical health of students and school staff deteriorated, underscoring the critical role social-emotional well-being plays in school success.

#### 2. Relationship Building and a Focus on People's Well-being are Essential

The pandemic required the project to slow down and focus on the health of the people involved. By listening to a wide variety of voices and honoring their collective wisdom, we underscore equity and belonging as central, non-negotiable components of a viable strategy for promoting student growth.

#### 3. Flexibility and Adaptation are Necessary Ingredients

A culture of flexible adaptation was required to respond to the realities brought on by the pandemic.



#### 4. Building and Sustaining Partnerships Requires Ongoing Work and a Shared Context

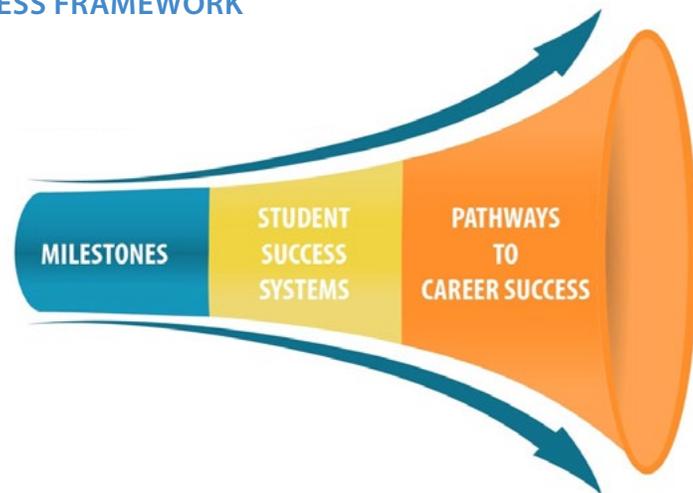
Identifying local partners and nurturing relationships requires commitment and continuous engagement.

#### 5. The Pandemic Promoted Rich Conversations as Schools Looked for New Solutions

The pandemic exposed challenges for educators in tracking student progress and led to national conversations that resulted in the development of the National Milestones for Career Success (see Appendix 1).

## ABOUT THE ON TRACK TO CAREER SUCCESS FRAMEWORK

The OTCS Framework is an evidence-based model that helps develop connections between secondary schools, colleges and other post-secondary training entities, and employers. Those connections are used to give all high school students, including those facing the toughest challenges, the opportunity to have educational and workplace experiences, buttressed by social-emotional support, that build skills and open pathways to jobs and careers with family-supporting wages.



### THE ON TRACK TO CAREER SUCCESS FRAMEWORK HAS THREE KEY ELEMENTS:

- 1. Milestones:** Evidence-based academic, [social-emotional](#), and college and career [milestones](#) for high school students were developed by the Everyone Graduates Center (EGC) at Johns Hopkins University along with a cohort of high schools (including OTCS schools) during the 2020-2021 school year. Students reaching these milestones will have higher odds of being on track to career success. The milestones underscore the journey a young person makes from high school to their post-secondary life, which includes social-emotional and academic development, supportive and guiding relationships with caring adults, and supported post-secondary experiences, including exposure to college and career options. Each OTCS school community will work together to create localized versions of the milestones.
- 2. Student Success Systems:** OTCS schools will be implementing [Early Warning Systems](#) in grades 9-12. Teams will monitor all students' progress toward the milestones and well-established predictive indicators of high school graduation and college attainment, often referred to as the ABC's: Attendance, Behavior/Engagement, and Course Performance. Strategic responses to these indicators are shaped by information gathered on another set of ABCs: Agency, Belonging, and Connectedness, which were informed by lessons from brain science and adolescent development research, as well as insights from teachers, students, and parents.
- 3. Pathways to Career Success:** This element requires school and community partners to expand opportunities for all students to receive support as they explore college and career options and take part in meaningful workplace experiences. A range of supports is vital, including help with applications, college visits, job-shadowing, dual-credit coursework to help students get early college credits, work-based learning, and instruction leading to industry certifications. Such supports are offered across grades 9 through 12 and are tracked as part of the Student Success System. Critical to this element are partnerships with local nonprofits, higher education institutions, community members, and employers, all needed to establish pathways to career success for all students.

*The OTCS requires all three components to work together to help students stay on track for post-secondary success. Milestones help provide a common set of experiences and preparations for all students. Student success systems enable school teams to monitor student progress toward those milestones and identify where additional improvement and/or supports are needed. And pathways to career success built with outside partners give students viable options to transition from high school to post-secondary schooling and training in careers that provide family-supporting wages.*



## OTCS KEY PARTNERS

On Track to Career Success relies on a range of key partners that work to imagine, implement, and sustain the project:

- **Schools that take part in the project** are the co-designers and implementers of the OTCS framework, help create the project’s infrastructure, and provide support to students inside and beyond the school walls.
- **Youth at the OTCS schools** help shape the project, provide feedback, and engage in all elements of the model.
- **Local Partners** serve as co-designers and help determine how to adapt the framework to meet local needs and opportunities.
- **Implementation Partners** provide support for the overall project.
- **The Annie E. Casey Foundation** is the key funder and serves as a convener and co-designer of the model.
- **The Everyone Graduates Center** at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education serves as the project manager, organizer, co-designer, and technical assistance provider.
- **The National Advisory Panel** includes experts in education and workforce development and funders that provide feedback on tools, processes, and strategy.

The OTCS framework is designed to intimately involve teachers, students, and local partners in the work’s creation. Research supports the idea that if this does not occur, the work will not be sustained. Having input from teachers, counselors, and administrators, as well as students, families, and community members brings more diverse perspectives to program design. Teachers, administrators, and students are responsible for the grade-level milestones — as opposed to a guidance counselor, for example, being tasked with tracking everything — which result in shared accountability and ownership.

## LAUNCHING OTCS DURING THE PANDEMIC

OTCS launched in early 2020 at the same time the COVID-19 pandemic began. Stressors emerged during the first year and a half of the pandemic and disproportionately hit OTCS schools' students, as many live in intergenerational households and suffered the loss of a loved one. Students experienced social anxiety and stress with returning to school, even as the loss of connection from others at school hurt their mental health.

Other students worked as the pandemic hit and continued to work as they tried to return to school. Principals were reporting for the first time that they felt like they were fighting the labor market for students' time and attention. When schools returned to in-person instruction, 9th- and 10th-graders faced especially steep challenges as students and staff often did not know each other. Roughly half of the student population in the school was new to the other students and staff. Of the schools that originally launched OTCS in 2020, only one, Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) High School in Albuquerque, is still participating, although OTCS has recruited new schools: Grants High School and Laguna Acoma Jr./Sr. High School in New Mexico, and Warren Easton High School in New Orleans.

In OTCS schools, the 2022-2023 academic year has been far less affected by the pandemic. The schools are building deeper relationships with partner organizations,

allowing for considerable progress creating and implementing the model. As the pandemic recedes, the OTCS schools are at different stages in implementing the project's three main parts. All are working though, with a renewed sense of energy.

For example, in the case of student success systems, one of the OTCS schools has mapped the full range of interventions, but the school was not utilizing the resource during student support meetings. The OTCS framework in tandem with [Design Thinking](#) sessions with staff were used to approach the work with our school partners, guiding revisions to how they handle student support meetings and then adding advisory sessions to existing schedules. Advisory sessions are becoming a place for students to monitor their grades, learn about careers, and participate in restorative justice practices and connection circles.

In another example, RFK Charter School in Albuquerque is demonstrating a promising community partnership with Valle Encantado Organicos, an agriculture partner. The organization's Grow the Growers farm training and business acceleration program, offers comprehensive, multi-year training to attract people into farming to support careers and strengthen the South Valley food economy. RFK students are participating in the farm program and preparing to become the next generation of food and farming entrepreneurs.



RFK Farming

Many schools are focused on responding to the needs of the moment rather than thinking strategically or building a vision for the future. This expanding need for student success systems highlights the value that OTCS can bring to schools.

However, OTCS schools face challenges in fully implementing the model. Initially, that model recognized the importance of sustaining support for students for two years after high school. The pandemic's negative impacts on both high school graduation and post-secondary enrollment rates show these supports are needed more than ever; these impacts disrupted progress in engaging with Native American, Black, and Latino students, the student groups primarily served by OTCS schools during the height of the pandemic. Seniors graduated but increasingly delayed entry into higher education or the workplace, while others formally or informally dropped out of school, often to support siblings in their schooling. Once young adults become disconnected from school or the labor market, it becomes challenging to reconnect them to educational or training opportunities.

OTCS schools understand the need to sustain these post-high school connections, but they don't have the capacity to do it. Nationally, we see similar trends, with increasing numbers of students becoming disconnected and schools unable to provide needed services.

Even in 2023, the pandemic's effects are ongoing. Many students in OTCS schools struggle with attendance, social-emotional challenges, and academic performance. And many schools are focused on responding to the needs of the moment rather than thinking strategically or building a vision for the future. This expanding need for student success systems highlights the value that OTCS can bring to schools.

## OTCS PANDEMIC INSIGHTS

The insights shared in this brief are drawn from experiences during the pandemic implementing On-Track to Career Success and two related evidence based research projects from the [Everyone Graduates Center](#), [Cross-State High School Redesign](#), and [Pathways to Adult Success](#).

### **Schools Play a Critical Role Connecting Students and Staff — An Essential Building Block for Emotional Well-Being and Success**

The pandemic generated a stark reminder of how schools provide profoundly important human connections for students, staff, and community members. In some respects, the education field took for granted the connections that schools provide and how they supported well-being and school success. The pandemic

shift to virtual learning disrupted those human connections, and the mental health (and sometime physical health) of students and school staff deteriorated. The disruptions underscored how strongly social-emotional well-being influences school success. Research supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has shown that being connected to school is as close as we have to a universal prevention measure. High school students who had an adult at school who knew and cared about them as a person during the pandemic, either in person or virtually, reported half the mental problems of students who did not report this connection. Only half of high school students said they had this connection during the pandemic, and only a third of high school students from historically under-served students. The conclusion was clear: direct connections between students and caring adults at schools is vital.

## THE INGREDIENTS FOR SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

A growing body of research on [school connectedness](#) and the experiences within OTCS schools during the pandemic suggest students experience stronger school connectedness when four things are true.

**1. *They know that there is at least one adult at the school who cares about them as a person.***

Many schools focused during the pandemic on the mental health and the well-being of their school members and their communities. All OTCS schools, for example, became meal distribution points for their neighborhoods. Adults working at the OTCS schools were checking regularly with students to ensure they were all right. In similar fashion, smaller teams from the administrative team divided up the teachers' rosters to make weekly calls to check in with staff.

**2. *They have a supportive peer group.***

Having adults and peers in a school who know and care about a student is key to their graduating. Students often find these connections — both to adults and peers — through sports or other extracurriculars. Sports and other activities serve to make school a more welcoming place for many kids who may otherwise feel they do not fit in. Maintaining supportive peer groups during the pandemic proved to be a challenge for OTCS schools, though several made concerted efforts to provide virtual student activities.

**3. *They engage in pro-social activities that are meaningful to them or help others.***

While adolescents are often thought of as “me”-oriented, the EGC has found they are more motivated by helping others than themselves. RFK School in Albuquerque is focused on community action and involvement, and the school is a critical community anchor. Many students there were willing to take part in local community-focused activities. For example, several students worked with a local artist to create a community mural depicting the impact of gun violence in an activity begun during the pandemic. In other schools, students self-organized tutoring and technology support groups to support other students through remote learning.

**4. *They find school to be a welcoming place that accepts them for who they are.***

As OTCS schools worked to develop their student support systems amid the pandemic, it became clear that schools must meet students and families where they are. For example, in the OTCS schools in New Mexico and New Orleans, many high school students took jobs during the pandemic to help support their families; some students had to care for younger siblings when their parents continued to work when school was virtual. As a result, the high school students could not do their schoolwork during regular school hours. The OTCS schools adapted by providing access to teachers or other adult support via e-mail and text during traditionally off hours. These schools recognized that students may struggle to respond fully to standard school practices due to factors beyond their control, rather than to a lack of interest or self-discipline. This recognition has carried over in OTCS schools as they have returned to more normal operations, reexamining their practices to better support students dealing with complex external issues.

## Relationship Building and a Focus on People's Well-being are Essential

The EGC team made it a priority to build relationships even as meetings were forced to take place online because of the pandemic. A key focus was the well-being of the school staff. Open, honest dialogue occurred in one-on-one meetings and [empathy interviews](#) to understand the context of each school.

For example: We conducted empathy interviews with 50 percent of the staff at RFK and Warren Easton Charter High School in New Orleans to build our awareness and understanding of the challenges they faced, such as programs that needed a refresh or new attention.

The EGC team was always willing to join meetings, no matter what time they took place. This gave the team a comprehensive understanding of each school as students, staff, and community members shared their personal stories and journeys and spoke of the hardships being endured by their families. These conversations created trust that allowed the EGC team to become full partners with staff and community members.

Building relationships with students has been an essential labor of love for OTCS, as we recognize the importance of having students help design the project. Specifically, we have been working with a small group of 18 students using the [Liberatory Design Process](#). Students participate in discussion circles and empathy interviews and are identifying college and career experiences for their school communities.

The OTCS team is confident that this work during the pandemic will continue to pay dividends. We listened and put the needs of the people ahead of the needs of the project, building trust and solidifying the team's standing as valued partners.

The pandemic required the EGC team to go more slowly than had been planned. Nonetheless, the time was well spent. By listening to a wide variety of voices and honoring their collective wisdom, we underscore equity and belonging as central, non-negotiable components of a viable strategy. Our schools recognize that their OTCS partners authentically value their wisdom. It was imperative to focus on the physical and emotional safety and well-being of the staff, students, and families, but that work also built a stronger foundation for the OTCS effort.



## Flexibility and Adaptation are Necessary Ingredients

The project was forced to be flexible to deal with changing on-the-ground realities. That included different experiences retaining schools and partners through the pandemic. Before the pandemic, EGC formed a positive working relationship with a local nonprofit, the New Orleans Career Center (NOCC), which agreed to be the local lead partner for the New Orleans Design Team. With NOCC, EGC engaged with local partners including schools, charter management organizations, community colleges, two local universities, and several nonprofits engaged in supporting the city's most vulnerable youth and young adults. Two high schools operating under the same charter management organization agreed to participate in the OTCS project with an initial focus on strengthening their 9th grade academies and piloting activities to help customize the milestones. While we maintained the working relationship during the first year of the pandemic by pivoting our efforts to help them meet immediate needs, we were not able to sustain it through the second year. A major reason for this was leadership turnover within the CMO and at both schools.

Dealing with repeated shifts in learning modes, schools could not sustain a new initiative, even with members of the school staff ready to move forward. The local OTCS continued to build relationships with two local universities and planned to recruit, train, and engage college students to serve as virtual tutors and mentors to students at the two high schools. But the universities were forced by the pandemic to shorten their semesters, which hurt the ability to recruit, train, and engage local college students.

Warren Easton Charter High School in New Orleans agreed to become a school partner for the OTCS project in July 2022 after activities that included a listening and learning tour conducted by the local OTCS team. Easton leaders and another school informed up that aligning the project to the five pillars developed by the National Governors Association, which the Louisiana State Department of Education expects of all high schools, was valuable and allowed schools to embrace the project to meet state expectations.

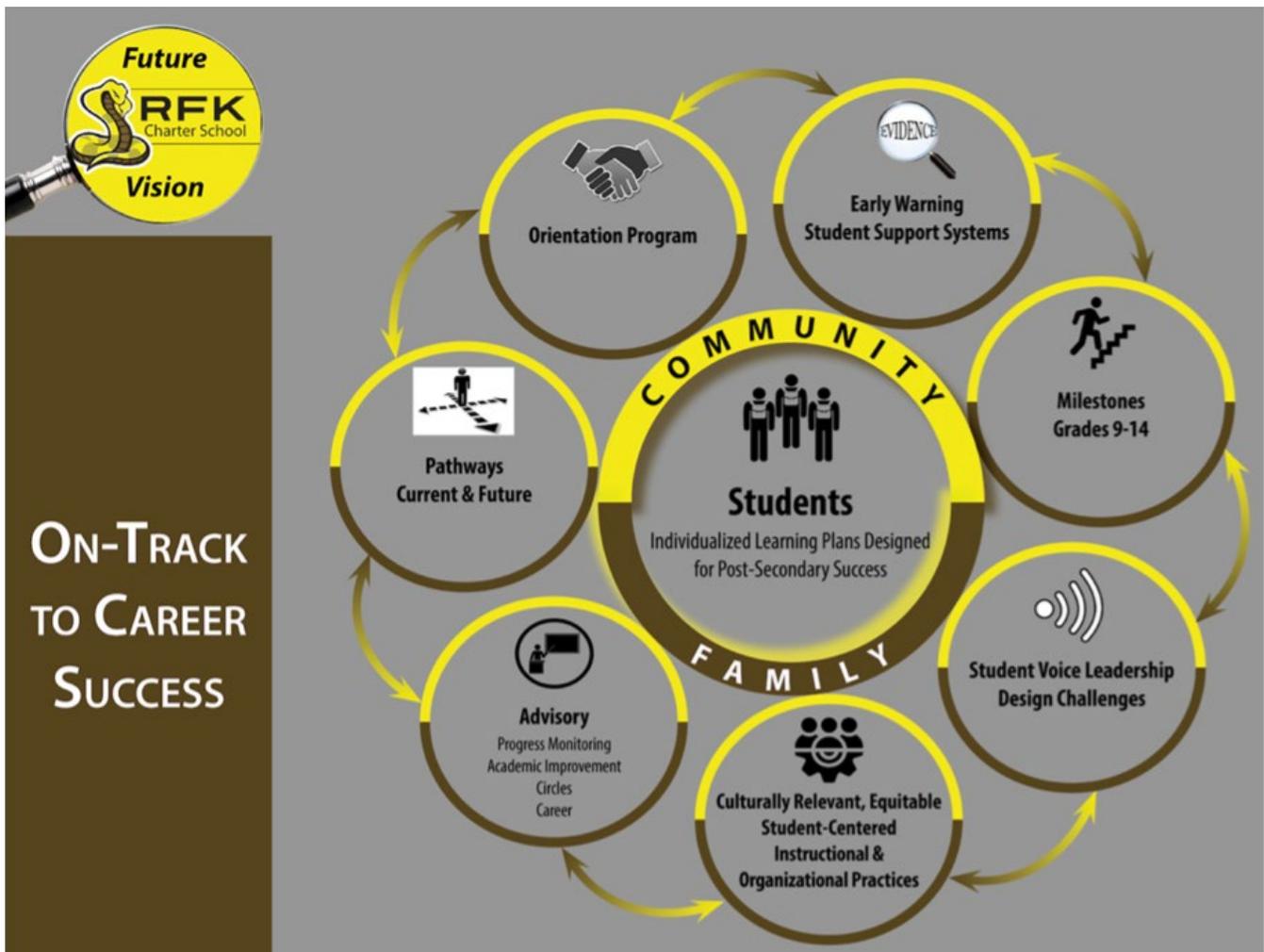
The situation at RFK School in Albuquerque was vastly different. RFK persisted during the pandemic and

**RFK School saw the OTCS as part of their path forward in becoming a school that is the first choice for students and families instead of a last chance school.**

adjusted the pace and focus of the OTCS project to make it work. RFK was one of the pioneer charter schools in Albuquerque Public Schools, established as a “last chance” school for students, giving the school team experience navigating complicated and unfamiliar situations. They saw the OTCS as part of their path forward in becoming a school that is the first choice for students and families instead of a last chance school. This vision is becoming a reality at RFK, which admitted 20 new first choice students during the 2022-2023 school year at a time when many schools are losing students.

RFK managed the competing priorities of the pandemic, thanks to being a flexible organization with a deep-seated commitment to do whatever it takes to help students and families. RFK's track record supporting students and families has led to strong partnerships with two higher education institutions, Community College of New Mexico and the University of New Mexico, the South Valley Economic Development Council, Albuquerque Interfaith, and other regional organizations. These partnerships helped the school sustain the OTCS effort.

Finally, RFK created a vision document (on page 11) showing how the elements of the OTCS model are incorporated and connected to the future of the students, staff, community, and families — providing a visual guide to the project's complicated structure.



### Building and Sustaining Partnerships Requires Ongoing Work and a Shared Context

Creating and sustaining partnerships for OTCS requires ongoing engagement, preferably face-to-face, and a shared context that was difficult during the pandemic.

In New Mexico, Future Focused Education, a leader in connecting jobseekers to jobs and careers, was ready to send students to work with local employers when the school concluded the students were not adequately prepared. The school is now assessing how to prepare the students through on-campus visits and incorporating a curriculum using social and emotional learning and workplace-readiness activities.

In New Orleans, similar pandemic-related challenges confronted both OTCS schools and local partners.

For example, OTCS had formed a partnership with a local nonprofit that had deep experience in career education.

However, the nonprofit struggled to both maintain its core work during the pandemic and devote time to OTCS. Another partner, New Orleans Career Center, also pivoted away from OTCS during the pandemic to provide training to meet the urgent demand for health care workers.

In some respects, it became clear that a working model of OTCS is needed in a school before local partners can fully understand the project and how it fits with their broader missions. Yet the project pushed forward with local partners before such a model was in place, leading to challenges including communication issues between schools and partners.

## The Pandemic Promoted Rich Conversations as Schools Looked for New Solutions

During the pandemic, high schools involved in EGC's overlapping projects — OTCS, Cross-State High School Redesign, and Pathways to Adult Success — repeatedly expressed concerns about how to stay connected with students being pulled away from school for a variety of reasons. These concerns generated a broader discussion about the key academic, social, emotional, and college-

and career-readiness milestones that are crucial for adult success. This led to the development of National Milestones in these areas, which are a key building block for OTCS schools (see Appendix 1 to review the milestones). This conversation and design effort brought together over 40 educators from Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, New Mexico, Ohio, and Virginia in three virtual sessions. These educators came from a wide range of experiences and backgrounds, which fostered a rich design experience.



## WHAT'S NEXT

The OTCS project will continue to share findings and updates, including a brief outlining the first meeting of network school representatives in October 2022. That brief will review discussion topics from that gathering and will provide additional insights about the OTCS framework.

Over the next school year, OTCS schools will install, implement, and measure progress of student success systems. This will include OTCS use of grade-level milestones and engaging with student design teams to provide feedback on the approach and develop new solutions.

## APPENDIX 1: ON TRACK TO CAREER SUCCESS NATIONAL MILESTONES

### 9th Grade Milestones

#### *Social-Emotional and Academic Development*

- Development of key social-emotional learning competencies, mindfulness techniques, self-advocacy and reflection, resiliency, conflict resolution.
- Learn how to set goals, and work toward them, have relevance in attending school and engaging in courses, resiliency in the face of obstacles, exhibits problem solving skills.
- Open to highlight work habits and present/share/publish the work they are most proud of (connection to creating a portfolio).
- Students can articulate in student-friendly language the expectations for high school graduation and grade-level expectations, can self-assess where they are in relation to those, and can reflect on opportunities for growth and learning.
- Students find early success in academic classes, connected with understanding the clear importance of passing and grades in their path to post-secondary.

#### *Relationship-Driven Pathway Supports*

- Initial welcome to high school (academy/bootcamp/exploration) that makes 9th graders feel successful; introduces administrators, teachers, and students; includes school tours; introduces the school schedule, etc.
- Quarterly conversation with a caring adult that guides the student in self-reflection on their path to and through graduation.
- Connection opportunities with peers to process the high school experience, reflect, help each other, and build community.
- With support, students can identify their own interests and skills and how they relate to the problems they want to solve in the world, potential high school and college courses, and career interests.

### 10th/11th Grade Milestones

#### *Social-Emotional and Academic Development*

- Demonstrated ability to self-select courses in line with their graduation plan.
- Construct growing portfolio documenting academic, career-related, and personal work and growth.
- Involved in at least one “extra” activity beyond core academic content to allow for novel experiences and learning.
- Engage in service-learning project to address community challenges.
- Students co-create their own 10th/11th grade milestones.

#### *Relationship-Driven Pathway Supports*

- Create life and personal goals to reflect on through 10th and 11th grades.
- Participate in an intentionally grouped advisory session.
- Develop a sense of belonging and agency for families.
- Quarterly conversation with a caring adult that guides the student in self-reflection on their path to and through graduation.
- Peer mentorship to develop leadership and relationship skills.
- Interview recent alumni.

### ***Post-Secondary Preparation***

- Summer or intersession experience on a campus or technical center, ideally with a stipend for completion.
- If applicable, choose a career and technical training pathway based on a chosen career path.
- Have two or more career experiences – e.g., job, job shadowing, externship/internship, mentoring in a field of interest.
- Begin early-release and receive credit for work-based learning, if applicable.
- Undergo a vocational assessment.

## **12th Grade Milestones**

### ***Post-Secondary Exploration and Planning***

- Ongoing career exploration days, guest speakers, internships, apprenticeships, work-based experience, externships, etc.
- Construct growing portfolio documenting academic, career-related, and personal work and growth to complete in grade 12.
- Explore and investigate career opportunities, utilize local resources to research tentative career goals; develop the ability to explain pathway to desired career(s).
- Experience college fairs, college visits, and visits from guest speakers to hear about what worked and did not in post-secondary education.
- Complete requirements to earn a micro-credential.
- Have opportunity to take higher-level classes with support throughout high school. Support ramps down over time so 12th-graders are more-independent thinkers.

### ***Relationship-Driven Supports***

- Maintain mentor/mentee relationship for two years after high school.
- Take part in ceremony and culminating experiences, with a focus on ceremonies between grades 11 and 12.
- Complete leadership/work portfolio to demonstrate growth and metacognition.
- Opportunities to perform and highlight work to their families, friends, and the community; to practice public presentation skills in an authentic setting.

### ***Personal Competencies and Life Knowledge***

- Demonstrate effective communication skills (how to write texts and emails and advocate for selves) and problem-solving skills.
- Demonstrate strong financial literacy understanding and skills.
- Students can unpack, reflect, and think forward about setbacks.
- Be able to reflect on and articulate strategies to employ when anxious, stressed, overwhelmed, and when students fall short or experience a setback.

### ***Post-secondary Experiences and Connection***

- Students access the Student Center to reconnect, get help with housing, tuition, applications, interviews, etc.
- Has completed one to two years of college or training.
- Paid internships or employment opportunities.

