

# CAREER PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS:

Supporting Young Adults in Education and Employment



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report aims to equip funders, nonprofits, public agencies and others with actionable insights to create meaningful economic opportunities for young people. It highlights key strategies the Annie E. Casey Foundation and its partners have implemented to help young people navigate the increasingly complex transitions from school to work. This report shares lessons from Casey-funded initiatives, addresses persistent challenges and explores emerging trends and strategies employed since the Foundation's 2012 publication, *Youth and Work: Restoring Teen and Young Adult Connections to Opportunity*.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This report was made possible by the work of Patrice Cromwell, who worked at the Foundation for nearly 20 years and served as vice president of the Center for Economic Opportunity from 2021 to 2024. Patrice was a beloved colleague; her warmth, wisdom and leadership touched countless lives.

## ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children and youth by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation's [website](#).

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# CONTENTS

4	Introduction
5	Expanding Employment Opportunities for Young People
6	Key Principles and Focus Areas
7	Key Investments
7	Generation Work
8	Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) <sup>™</sup>
9	The Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (PAYA)
10	Social Enterprises
11	Lessons and Strategies
18	Challenges and Limitations
20	Conclusion
21	Resources
22	Endnotes
23	Appendix

# INTRODUCTION

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Compared to previous generations, today's young adults are embarking on longer and more complex journeys when they transition from school to work.<sup>1</sup> While many high school graduates pursue a postsecondary education immediately, others opt to enter the workforce first or balance school and work through nontraditional routes like apprenticeships, so they can focus on basic and short-term needs while keeping long-term goals in view.

Young people who have had to step away from school often have limited options for resuming their education. While efforts are underway to improve coordination across youth-serving systems, public policies and institutions have not always kept pace with the changing needs of these young people. As a result, young people continue to encounter obstacles as they transition into adulthood.

Young adults may:

- lack access to opportunities that offer a clear path from education to employment with family-sustaining income such as internships and apprenticeships;
- have barriers to employment and upward mobility such as involvement in the justice system; and/or
- need to navigate a patchwork of systems, programs and initiatives, each with its own rules, funding sources and points of access.

This disjointed approach to education, training and employment makes it harder for young people to find and stay on a pathway that fits their aspirations. Even when support exists, the complexity of navigating multiple systems while juggling school, work and life responsibilities can be overwhelming.

Completing postsecondary programs also remains challenging for many, especially for students from low-income communities. These students are less likely than students from higher-income communities to complete college within six years of completing high school (29% versus 51%).<sup>2</sup>



Similarly, lower-income students transfer to four-year institutions at a lower rate than higher-income students (26% versus 33%).<sup>3</sup>

Although high school graduation rates have continued to rise, so has the number of young people ages 16 to 24 who are neither enrolled in school nor working. In 2023, over 1 million teenagers were not in school or working. Today, a much higher number of young people are loosely connected to education and employment.<sup>4</sup>

These numbers highlight the urgent need to invest in youth-serving systems and embrace opportunities for innovation. When educators, employers, community leaders and policymakers work together, they can create stronger, more aligned efforts that support flexible pathways for young people to explore, connect and thrive. Clear options, accurate information and strong relationships within these systems empower young adults to navigate their journeys with greater confidence. Addressing basic needs, such as housing, mental health care, transportation and child care, can help ensure that young people can remain engaged in school or work.

Ultimately, when we help young people transition successfully into adulthood, we unlock potential that strengthens our workforce, economy and communities.

# EXPANDING EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation invests in efforts to equip young people who are neither enrolled in school nor working — often referred to as “opportunity youth” — with the skills, credentials and experiences needed to prepare for placement in their first job, gain experience and grow their careers.

These efforts bridge different partners — such as high schools, community colleges, workforce development organizations and employers — to provide young people with integrated services to help them stay connected, complete their education and get started on their careers.

To support young people in attaining the education, skills and experiences needed to navigate the job market, the Casey Foundation’s education, employment and training investments focus on:



## HIGH SCHOOL RECONNECTION AND COMPLETION

Advancing multiple pathways to high school graduation, including high-quality alternative high school models and work-based learning opportunities that allow students to earn and learn while in school



## POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Integrating strategies that meet the basic needs of students with low incomes, make college affordable and create structured opportunities for young people to advance along a career pathway and earn a credential



## INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

Supporting partnerships between workforce development practitioners and businesses in specific industries to develop practices that promote the hiring, retention and advancement of young adults ages 18 to 29



## JOB CREATION AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Creating job opportunities with mission-driven businesses that help young people develop skills and earn income, while also demonstrating effective workplace practices for supporting young people who experience barriers to employment



# KEY PRINCIPLES AND FOCUS AREAS

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The Foundation's work aims to create conditions that allow all young people to succeed. To do so, investments follow several key principles and focus areas:

- **Youth engagement and leadership** — Creating opportunities for youth and young adults to help shape and strengthen educational and employment offerings is critical. These opportunities also support their development as leaders and prepare them for the workplace.
- **Workforce system policies and practices** — The Foundation invests in research, tools and resources that help policymakers adjust the work of public systems to better support young workers.
- **Addressing barriers** — Addressing barriers to young peoples' success is key. In 2023, the number of young people who were neither enrolled in school nor working (ages 16 to 24) in the United States was roughly 7%. These rates increased to 8% for Latino young people, 9% for Black young people and 10% for Native American young people.<sup>5</sup> The Foundation's investments ensure young people are connected to opportunities that provide income, skill development and support services tailored to their specific circumstances.
- **Support for youth who have been involved in child welfare and justice systems** — Casey has invested in efforts that create opportunities for young people with system experience, who tend to face significant obstacles as they pursue educational opportunities or try to get started and advance in the workplace. This includes ensuring young people transitioning out of systems are connected to supportive adults and have stable housing, education and economic security so they can secure well-paying jobs to support their families and invest in their communities.
- **Data-driven research** — The Foundation grounds its investments in research about adolescent brain development and practices focused on executive function, the set of cognitive abilities needed to set goals and follow through on them. These strategies also use disaggregated data to identify and respond to the unique needs of specific groups of young people and to assess the effectiveness of programs and policies.
- **Scaling effective strategies** — The Foundation's investments focus on incubating solutions and informing policies that seek to eventually expand employment for millions of youth across the country.



# KEY INVESTMENTS

The Casey Foundation's three long-term initiatives — Generation Work, Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) and the Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (PAYA) — have addressed the varied needs of young people. The Foundation also invests in employment social enterprises that create jobs to help youth develop skills and earn income.

## Generation Work

Generation Work connects young adults to jobs that pay well and support their upward mobility. It also helps employers attract and retain a wider pool of qualified talent.

The initiative, which concluded in 2025, integrates two promising practices:

- 1 Industry partnerships that align the needs of employers in specific sectors with the skills and talents of job seekers with low incomes.** These partnerships with government agencies, educational institutions, nonprofits, business associations and local philanthropic institutions leverage their deep knowledge of industry as well as their understanding of the assets and experiences of young adults to identify and cultivate employment opportunities.
- 2 Evidence-based positive youth development principles that help young people build the social-emotional skills needed to succeed at work.** These skills include conflict resolution, problem solving and team building. Positive youth development is a strategic approach designed to recognize and enhance young people's strengths by providing a range of support, including fostering strong relationships with adults. This social-emotional skill development often complements technical training, such as hands-on learning through internships, mentoring and coaching.

The first phase of Generation Work provided funding to five communities over five years. Each implemented approaches that were unique to their community and the needs of young people.

In 2022, Casey partnered with the National Fund for Workforce Solutions and four U.S. cities joined the second phase of Generation Work. Partners are deepening their engagement efforts with employers to support young adults' connections to job opportunities that advance employment stability and career advancement.

[Read more about Generation Work communities in Lessons and Strategies](#)

## Creating Opportunities and Working With Employers in Seattle

[Port Jobs](#), a Generation Work grantee, works closely with the Port of Seattle to connect King County residents to jobs, training opportunities and career advancement within the airport, trade, logistics, construction and maritime sectors. Along with career placement services, Port Jobs helps job seekers find and access housing, child care and health care.

Port Jobs also operates Airport University, which partners with two local community colleges to provide courses at the airport with class topics and schedules that fit the needs of both airport workers and employers.

The program adapted a proven approach for adult workers — preparing and matching job seekers with careers in aviation, hospitality and other fields — to younger workers by incorporating positive youth development principles, including meeting regularly with employers and incoming tenants to support talent pipelines. Through this work, Port Jobs has influenced employers to introduce new, youth-friendly business practices.

## Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP)

LEAP was launched by the Casey Foundation and the Corporation for National and Community Service in 2015. This initiative, which concluded in 2024, focused on youth and young adults ages 14 to 25 who experienced foster care, involvement with the criminal justice system or homelessness. LEAP demonstrated ways to increase employment and educational opportunities for young people facing major challenges on the path to adulthood.

Core elements of LEAP pathways included:

- environments that foster a sense of belonging and hope;
- flexible learning experiences tailored to young people's goals or needs and responsive to the labor market;
- youth-centered design and leadership;
- support for meeting basic needs and navigating public systems;
- youth-adult relationships; and
- formalized structures for cross-organizational collaboration and shared accountability.

During LEAP's first phase, the Foundation provided critical funding and support to local partners in 13 cities and eight states. The aim was to adapt two evidence-based education and career pathway models — Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) and Jobs for the Future's Back on Track — to address the specific needs and goals of young people with system involvement and provide supportive services such as connection to mental health care, housing and positive relationships with caring adults.

JAG works in high schools, middle schools and community-based organizations to provide young people with job skills, hands-on experience and support as they move from graduation to employment, military service or postsecondary education. The Back on Track model helps young adults connect to postsecondary education and career training opportunities. Back on Track also works to position young adults from low-income communities as untapped talent for employers and community assets, combating harmful narratives in the process.

In the second phase of LEAP, grantees focused on successfully meeting young adults' needs and engaging public system partners to connect more youth with system involvement to supportive career pathways. It also prioritized expanding young people's access to opportunities and resources that help them stay enrolled in school and participate in postsecondary education and employment training programs.

**Read more about LEAP partnerships in Lessons and Strategies**

### Making Space for Others



During her first year at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Tyeisha Thompson found herself immersed in the [LEAP Youth Fellowship program](#).

“I really found my voice and started to feel more confident,” said Thompson, who had entered foster care a second time at age 13 following her grandmother's passing.

Through the fellowship, Thompson created a plan to help children and young adults in foster care by transforming their living spaces into nurturing, personalized retreats. She partnered with local nonprofits to identify youth who could benefit from room renovations and designed spaces that foster healthy habits, celebrate individuality and make change less scary. “Whether you're in a permanent placement or with a family temporarily, you can benefit from using your space intentionally,” she said.



## The Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (PAYA)



The nonprofit think tank New America launched the Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (PAYA) — a multi-funder initiative working to expand high-quality youth apprenticeship programs and help more young people secure stable, well-paying jobs.

Research shows that three key factors improve career outcomes for youth in families with low incomes: exposure to postsecondary education; hands-on learning with mentorship; and early paid-work experience. Youth apprenticeships effectively combine these elements, offering students structured pathways to careers.

PAYA has three main goals: increasing apprenticeship opportunities that align with its quality standards; fostering learning and best practices; and strengthening evidence to drive policy and investment. National partners — including Advance CTE, Jobs for the Future, and CareerWise USA — support the initiative by shaping policy, career education and program implementation. Typically, students start in 11th or 12th grade; gain paid, on-the-job training; complete college credits; and prepare for further education and career advancement.

PAYA's partners are critical to the initiative's overall success. Employers define needed skills, collaborate on curricula and provide paid training; high schools support student participation while ensuring students meet graduation requirements; postsecondary institutions deliver college-level instruction and credentials; and intermediary organizations coordinate efforts across stakeholders.

Since its launch, PAYA has:

- set national standards for youth apprenticeships;
- built a network of 70+ communities;
- developed over 100 tools and resources; and
- influenced policy and funding at federal and state levels.

**Read more about PAYA partnerships in Lessons and Strategies**

### Connecting Young People to Education and Employment in Buffalo

PAYA grantee [Say Yes Buffalo](#) brings together partners — including parents and leaders from the local school district, higher education institutions, local government and Buffalo-area corporate, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations — to support young people through three strategies:

- 1 High school completion** — Connecting students to social services, academic support and after-school programs
- 2 College access** — Helping students explore college options and providing support with obtaining financial aid and scholarships for postsecondary credential programs and associate and bachelor's degree programs
- 3 Postsecondary completion and career exploration** — Connecting students to paid internships and youth apprenticeships

Nine years after launching, Say Yes Buffalo expanded its college offerings to include apprenticeship opportunities in three high-growth and high-demand industries: advanced manufacturing, business operations and information technology. Along with supporting young people, the effort helps employers by allowing them to recruit from a diverse pool of workers and find talented applicants for hard-to-fill positions. Say Yes Buffalo also supports and coaches employers to help promote retention and advancement of apprentices.

## Social Enterprises

A [social enterprise](#) is a business created to advance a social purpose in a financially sustainable way. The Foundation has long supported social enterprises like Juma Ventures and organizations such as REDF that fund and strengthen these mission-driven businesses. Social enterprises can:

- create employment and skill-building opportunities for those entering or returning to work;
- offer an independent source of income, networks and business experiences to nonprofits and workers; and
- provide work-based learning and wraparound support for employees.

[Juma Ventures](#) operates concession businesses with the purpose of employing young people for six months. It helps young people learn to manage their money, gain skills essential for the workplace and connect to permanent employment with one of Juma's corporate employer partners. Juma focuses on meeting the specific needs of opportunity youth.

Since its launch in 1993, Juma Ventures has:

- employed more than 1,000 young people annually across the United States;
- generated more than \$44 million in earned revenue to support young people; and
- connected 85% of program graduates to jobs with partner employers, further education or both.

[REDF](#) is a venture philanthropy and [national nonprofit](#) that funds and supports employment-focused social enterprises (ESEs).

Since its launch in 1997, REDF has:

- deployed and unlocked over \$300 million in capital for 402 organizations across 42 states and Washington, D.C., focusing on expanding employment opportunities;
- enabled ESEs to double their profits and increase employment sixfold, collectively generating over \$2.5 billion in revenue and employing more than 133,500 individuals;
- made it possible for 75% of ESEs to offer workers opportunities to earn formal certifications or provided financial education;
- enabled for approximately 55% of ESEs to operate or connect workers to apprenticeship (or pre-apprenticeship) programs, career technical education or community college training; and
- arranged eight loans to social enterprises, supporting more than 8,500 individuals, including opportunity youth.

REDF's ESEs also provide critical stabilizing and skill-building support for workers. This reflects REDF's commitment to creating employment pathways young people need as they move into adulthood.

# LESSONS AND STRATEGIES



Over the past decade, the Casey Foundation has identified six key lessons — along with specific policy and practice strategies — to guide education, workforce development and human services partners in making meaningful progress.

“The Foundation and its partners have made important discoveries when it comes to helping young people navigate this formative period of their lives,” said Allison Gerber, vice president of the Casey Foundation’s Center for Economic Opportunity. “We hope the lessons we’ve learned will be useful to other funders, policymakers, direct service providers and employers.”



## 1 ALIGN SYSTEMS TO KNIT TOGETHER A WEB OF CONNECTED EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Public and private systems that provide education, training and employment options for young people tend to work independently of one another. Coordinating their services is a critical but difficult task. Truly aligning their efforts can require a wide range of organizations, including government agencies, employers, community-based organizations and other system stakeholders, to change how they work and partner.

To foster this strong alignment, strategies must include these principles:

### ■ Provide long-term support for structured partnerships.

Aligning systems takes structured and continuing relationships. Funding should support partnerships to work differently and develop relationships with one another, as well as a common vision, goals and clearly defined roles.

LEAP grantees built strong partnerships by developing a shared understanding of the initiative's goals; focusing on the mutual benefits of the partnership to address potential worries about competition for funding or participants; and establishing formal mechanisms for planning and feedback.

[Project for Pride in Living \(PPL\)](#) expanded the number of partners offering LEAP programming across the Twin Cities in Minnesota as part of its efforts to reach and serve more youth who are involved in the child welfare and justice systems. An essential step was to carefully assess whether new school- and community-based organizations are ready to be good partners.

All partners signed memoranda of understanding and participated in a multiday onboarding process to learn about key practice elements, data collection, staffing and how to integrate LEAP within their broader organizational priorities. PPL also hired a LEAP scaling manager to support new partnerships.



- **Make policy change a priority.**

Policy change is necessary to make systems work better for young people and help remove barriers and increase access to services, education and employment opportunities.

A state law went into effect that provided the two Generation Work partners in Cleveland with an opportunity to collaborate more closely. Two government agencies — the [Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services](#), which is primarily responsible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds, and locally run [Ohio Means Jobs](#), which is responsible for Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funds — worked together to enhance the workforce development offerings for youth. By combining their funding streams, they strengthened young adults' connections to training programs and helped youth meet the requirements necessary to receive TANF support.

- **Make funding more flexible.**

Federal and state funding streams, paired with more flexible funding sources — including philanthropic and alternative financing — provide a foundation for sustaining and expanding career pathways for young people.

In the LEAP initiative, each local partnership was required to match the Foundation's investment by securing additional philanthropic and public funding. The Nebraska LEAP partnership leveraged Casey's LEAP grant funds to secure a match from the Nebraska Department of Education to support postsecondary pathways for youth with system involvement.

- **Use shared performance measures.**

Collecting and analyzing data from multiple partners and agreeing on the right performance measures foster a shared sense of responsibility for outcomes.

PAYA developed a [data framework](#) to support partners' efforts to build data systems to monitor the effectiveness of youth apprenticeship programs and inform continuous improvement activities.

## 2 STRENGTHEN TIES AMONG ORGANIZATIONS TO LINK SERVICES

Even one-stop job centers or large human-service organizations often need to develop partnerships across departments to support young people. While the policies and funding structures that influence a system provide the framework for integration, partners must incorporate new ways of interacting into everyday practices.

Casey's investments have identified two key approaches to better linking services for young people:

- **Locate services together.**

Placing services together under one roof makes them more accessible to young people and can improve the coordination and alignment of services across organizations.



[The Door](#), a LEAP partner in New York City, serves youth who have been involved in the child welfare or justice systems, who have experienced homelessness or who are parents, providing them with postsecondary education systems and career-specific pathways. The Door makes its programs as convenient as possible by initiating early school-based transition support, including high school equivalency classes and tutoring services, and creating a pathway for youth to pursue postsecondary credentials or a college degree.

The Door partners with local colleges to provide dorm housing during breaks for youth experiencing homelessness — a particular barrier for those transitioning from the child welfare or justice systems. To better support young people, it also holds monthly check-ins and collaborates on joint case management with New York City's Administration for Children's Services.

#### ■ **Nurture provider and referral networks.**

Establishing communities of practice and networking can help organizations build trust with one another, learn from one another's work, share best practices and pursue common goals. These strategies help strengthen the young adult education and training system since partners begin to develop relationships and understand how they can coordinate services.

The Generation Work Seattle partners — [Aerospace Joint Apprenticeship Committee](#) and [Port Jobs](#) — organized joint recruitment activities, strengthening their capacity to recruit and serve more young adults.

### 3 BUILD EDUCATION AND CAREER PATHWAYS AND HELP YOUNG PEOPLE NAVIGATE THEM

The path from school to work can be confusing and hard to navigate. This is particularly true for young people from low-income communities and those who have smaller social networks. It's important to give young people clear information about the educational and training pathways available to them and help them make decisions about their best options.

PAYA-supported youth apprenticeship programs provide clear and structured steps for young people to finish high school, start their postsecondary education at little to no cost, complete paid work experience alongside a mentor and move into careers.

Three promising approaches for building education and career pathways:

#### ■ **Use paid work-based learning opportunities to support connections to career pathways.**

Work-based learning — opportunities for young people to gain work experiences while exploring different types of careers and building connections with professional networks and employers — is an effective complement or alternative to school-based learning that may lead to improved economic outcomes in adulthood.

The Brookings Institution and Child Trends found that for youth who experienced disadvantage in adolescence, participating in relationship-focused career and technical education is associated with having a job that pays family-sustaining wages by age 29.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, it is important for young people to earn income, especially those who need to pay for basic needs such as food, housing and child care. For many, participating in an unpaid work-based learning opportunity is not financially possible. Investments in work-based learning should compensate young people for their time.

■ **Create supportive employment arrangements.**

Supportive employment arrangements for young people provide income, on-the-job training, help with basic needs, a welcoming and safe work environment, and connections to caring adults. They are an effective way to offer entry-level jobs and sustain employment for young people with either no work experience or gaps in their employment histories. Supportive employment arrangements can include internships, jobs subsidized by workforce development programs, transitional jobs and employment at a social enterprise.

[The Coalition for Responsible Community Development](#) — a LEAP partner — operates CRCDC Enterprises, a social enterprise that specializes in California-licensed general contractor services in construction and facilities maintenance. It gives on-the-job training to individuals who may face hiring challenges elsewhere, including young people who have been involved in the justice system. Youth participants gain first-time job experience and acquire skills that can lead to a career with family-sustaining wages.

■ **Support positive relationships between youth and caring adults.**

Research shows that having positive adult relationships in school or the workplace enhances young people's social, emotional and cognitive skills and has a positive impact on their future ability to earn and support themselves.<sup>7</sup> Evidence also shows that these positive relationships help keep young people engaged in training or jobs.

The research organization MDRC's evaluation of LEAP found that participants who had positive experiences with the program often reported that their connection to a staff member was a primary reason for enrolling and staying engaged. Similarly, when Generation Work partner [Philadelphia II99C Training and Upgrading Fund](#) implemented a workplace-based mentorship program for nurse aides and practical nurse graduates, the organization saw an increase in job retention.

## 4 DEVELOP NEW AND FLEXIBLE MODELS OF SERVICE DELIVERY

Young people need education and training programs that offer flexible, varied service-delivery models to accommodate their specific life circumstances. These flexible service-delivery models include:

- accelerated education programs;
- competency-based learning formats such as credit for learning acquired on the job and in other nonclassroom settings;
- schedules that accommodate work and parenting responsibilities;
- remote and in-person options; and
- paid work-based learning experiences such as youth apprenticeships.

[Goodwill Excel Centers](#), which are high schools for adult students, offer an accelerated year-round schedule that includes five, eight-week terms to earn credits. Students who need more flexibility in their schedules to manage responsibilities like caregiving and work can choose between morning or afternoon classes (and evening classes at some locations) Monday through Thursday. Students can also stop taking classes and pick up where they left off later in the term.

## 5 HELP YOUNG PEOPLE MEET THEIR BASIC NEEDS

Helping young people meet their basic needs — such as food, housing, clothing, child care and transportation — equips them to achieve their education and employment goals. However, many education and workforce development systems or programs lack the necessary funding partnerships or connections to existing resources to support young people.

LEAP programs found that young people who disengaged from their career training or postsecondary program were often dealing with a pressing need such as housing or support to address the trauma they may have experienced in their lives. LEAP grantee [Covenant House Alaska](#) helps participants access these basic resources in a wide range of ways. Covenant House operates a shelter to house youth experiencing homelessness and connects them with a “permanency navigator.” These navigators work to keep participants in a stable home, often by referring them to subsidized housing, while also providing other help with basic needs, allowing them to stay on track with training, education and work.

MDRC’s evaluations of Generation Work and LEAP underscored the importance of support services. But, as noted in the Generation Work evaluation, practitioners in education and employment spend a lot of time and resources helping young people navigate the complex landscape of support services. Without a comprehensive and collaborative strategy in place, young people’s basic needs will remain unmet.

## 6 SUPPORT FUNDING FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Philanthropic institutions can play a role by considering support in three key areas:

### ■ **Building connections between policy advocates, practitioners and young workers.**

Experience and data show that policymakers could achieve better outcomes by reimagining how education and employment systems support young workers. However, practitioners who intimately understand the challenges of serving young people are generally not engaging in efforts to reimagine systems. Similarly, young workers are often not included in policy-advocacy conversations, and their expertise often is undervalued. And policy advocates too often focus on achievable incremental changes to law or administrative regulations and rarely think about long-term, holistic policy change.

Funders should consider how to educate or bring together practitioners, young people and policy advocates and encourage them to share their unique perspectives, experience and expertise to work on strategies for systems change. Funders also can contribute by conducting research, building partnerships and engaging strategically with public systems in policy implementation.

### ■ **Supporting states and localities to bridge fragmented education and employment systems.**

State and local agencies play a central role in managing and funding education and employment training systems. Policies and practices need to focus on how these entities can bridge the service gaps between systems to help young people progress in their education and employment journeys.

Funders should partner with referral networks and invest in integrated data systems to track young people and services across systems.

### ■ **Convincing employers to think differently about their hiring, onboarding and ongoing support for young workers.**

Young adults, particularly young people of color, are a growing share of the U.S. workforce.<sup>8</sup> Employers who want to hire and retain young adult talent may need to adopt practices and policies that better support young workers, including mentorship, training programs and clear pathways for advancement.

Funders should invest in efforts to support employers looking to expand their talent pipeline by using new strategies that benefit their employees and businesses. For example, they can provide funding and technical assistance that enables workforce practitioners to deepen their work with employers. Investments should prioritize creating resources that provide employers with concrete examples of ways they can recruit, retain and promote young workers.

# CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

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Through our investments, the Foundation has identified five key challenges that can impede efforts to align the work of public systems to support youth employment. Funders, nonprofits and public agencies that support the creation of career pathways to better serve young people may want to pay special attention to these conditions.

- **Barriers to creating flexible programming and partnerships with educational institutions.** Many high schools find it difficult to adapt their education model to better serve a wider variety of students through flexible programming and curricular offerings.

For example, districts and schools have trouble adjusting school schedules to accommodate apprenticeship or dual-enrollment opportunities. And existing funding and policies, such as accountability frameworks and reporting, do not always give high schools incentives to change their model and incorporate other program opportunities for students.

Postsecondary institutions, particularly community colleges, have made progress in implementing more flexible models of education delivery and performance data — including the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and most funding formulas — but they still typically promote two-year degrees and not shorter-term credentialing opportunities. These barriers and disincentives make it difficult to innovate in response to a changing labor market or sustain flexible approaches to addressing a diverse set of student needs.

- **Limited engagement between employers and education and training systems.** Collaborations between education and training providers and business partners have shown good results, but both entities often lack the capacity to consistently work together to align instruction and skills development with labor market demands. And, as previously mentioned, most employers do not regularly or proactively engage with training providers in developing talent pipelines.

Education and training institutions have insufficient resources and staff for deep and sustained employer engagement efforts. In addition, employers typically lack the ability to engage with education and training institutions and systems, and do not always understand their own workforce needs. These factors can make collaboration difficult, especially without targeted resources for education and training partners to cultivate and maintain relationships with employers.

- **Differences in organizational culture and practice that affect collaboration.** Aligning high school, postsecondary, workforce development and other youth-serving systems is hard work that requires flexible resources. It also requires partners to work differently, within their own institutions and across systems. They may need to change their cultures, policies and practices. In some cases, one partner may be obligated to stop doing something so another partner can do it instead, which can be difficult. Sustaining collaboration requires strong leadership, adequate resources, time and commitment.





- **Limited sustainable funding for supportive services.** There is a lack of federal and state funding to support basic needs, such as child care, transportation, housing and mental health, as young workers are gaining experience. Receiving services that meet basic needs often determines whether young people can access and successfully complete workforce programs.

Limited funding for supportive services creates a major challenge for organizations that provide education and training services. They must continually pursue grants to provide supportive services, which means the services may be inconsistent and stop when grant money runs out.

Without a comprehensive and collaborative strategy to tackle the issue, education and training staff spend a considerable amount of time piecing together supportive services for their young people, which is often still insufficient. When supportive services are funded, those services may not be well aligned with education and training services or employment. For example, a young person might be eligible to receive a child care voucher, but child care center hours might not fit with their work schedule.

- **Limited coaching and support to help young people make decisions about education and job opportunities.** Young people face difficult and weighty decisions about school, work and family. Having accurate and useful information is essential for making informed decisions. Unfortunately, it can be difficult for many young people — particularly young people of color, young parents and youth with system involvement — to access and use information about the labor market, including local jobs, training programs and career paths.<sup>9</sup> Educational institutions and training providers need clear insights into employer hiring needs to create effective pathways that help young workers thrive while addressing workforce demands. Additionally, staff who have knowledge and awareness of positive youth development approaches can focus on a young person's individual skills, goals and priorities to provide better coaching and support.



## CONCLUSION

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The Casey Foundation supports efforts to help young people and their communities thrive despite challenges such as economic shifts, disruptive technologies and limited access to opportunities.

Strong partnerships have been key to Casey's ability to foster career opportunities for young people transitioning from high school to higher education and into the workforce. The Foundation will continue to invest in bold strategies to expand proven pathways like apprenticeships and flexible employment programs that ensure young people can meet their basic needs while they are participating.

Policymakers, educators, nonprofits and funders must work together to build sustainable paths for all young people to attain viable careers and ensure young people and practitioners have a voice in shaping new solutions. By fostering cross-sector partnerships and prioritizing youth-centered approaches, programs and services can be more effective and responsive to what young people need.

When given the right coaching and opportunities to contribute meaningfully, young people are in the best position to develop their skills, pursue their goals and lead fulfilling lives.

# RESOURCES

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## Generation Work

- Read a [publication](#) from the [Generation Work partnership](#) in Hartford, Connecticut, that offers insights from interviews with current and past participants of the initiative's education and training programs.
- Use the Employer Engagement Question Bank [tool](#) — produced by the [Generation Work partnership of Northeast Ohio](#) — to access a list of questions that workforce development organizations can use to gauge whether an employer is a good fit for the young job seekers they serve.
- Explore this [publication](#), also from the Northeast Ohio Generation Work partnership, which highlights findings from interviews of 32 young adults who were engaged in workforce development services and training.
- Read the Foundation's [reflections](#) on the Generation Work initiative.

## Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP)

- Learn about the six members of a [LEAP fellows cohort](#), who worked closely with local LEAP partnerships, Casey staff and other youth-serving organizations.
- Discover [how LEAP partners adapted to the pandemic](#).
- Examine [lessons from LEAP](#).
- Find out more about [Project for Pride in Living](#), a LEAP partner.

## The Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (PAYA) and Apprenticeship Programs

- Use the PAYA Resource Library, a searchable [database](#) of youth apprenticeship resources from PAYA's network of partners across the country.
- Learn more about [youth apprenticeships](#).
- Find out [how PAYA is connecting the education and training needs of young people](#) to the talent demands of employers.
- Discover [how Phillip Fuller found a career in industrial engineering](#) through a PAYA apprenticeship.
- Read about [two recent PAYA resources](#) that shed new light on designing and advancing youth apprenticeship programs in the United States.
- Try the [Youth Apprenticeship Quality Assessment Tool](#) to identify ways to improve policies, procedures and practices to support learner success.
- Explore a [tool kit](#) that examines how apprenticeship programs can promote equitable outcomes for youth and young adults.
- Read a Casey-funded [report](#) that discusses how workforce development organizations build quality, work-based learning opportunities for youth and young adults.
- Learn more about the value of [work-based learning strategies](#).

## Social Enterprises

- Learn more about [social enterprises](#).
- Listen to [Casey President Lisa Lawson's conversation](#) with REDF CEO Carla Javits on the value of social enterprise employment.

# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Carnevale, A. P., Campbell, K. P., Cheah, B., Gulish, A., & Strohl, J. (2022). *The uncertain pathway from youth to a good job: Executive summary — The effects of race, class and gender*. Georgetown University, McCourt School of Public Policy, Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/chase-uncertain-pathway-es.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Jenkins, D., & Fink, J. (2016). *Tracking transfer: New measures of institutional and state effectiveness in helping community college students attain bachelor's degrees*. Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, The Aspen Institute, & National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/tracking-transfer-institutional-state-effectiveness.html>

<sup>3</sup> Velasco, T., Fink, J., Bedoya-Guevara, M., Jenkins, D., & LaViolet, T. (2025). *Tracking transfer: Community college and four-year institutional effectiveness in broadening bachelor's degree attainment*. Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, The Aspen Institute, & National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/Tracking-Transfer-Community-College-and-Four-Year-Institutional-Effectiveness-in-Broadening-Bachelors-Degree-Attainment.html>

<sup>4</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center. (2025). *16 key indicators of child well-being by domain* [Table]. <https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/Aecf-2025kidscountdatabook.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS Count Data Center. (2025). *Teens ages 16 to 19 not in school and not working by race in the United States* [Table]. <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/7803-teens-ages-16-to-19-not-in-school-and-not-working-by-race?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/2/2-53/true/1095,573,869,36,868/187,11,9,12,1,185,13/15064>

<sup>6</sup> Ross, M., Moore, K. A., Murphy, K., Bateman, N., DeMand, A., & Sacks, V. (2018). *Pathways to high-quality jobs for young adults*. Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings & Child Trends. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Brookings-Child-Trends-Pathways-for-High-Quality-Jobs-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ross, M., Kazis, R., Bateman, N., & Stater, L. (2020). *Work-based learning can advance equity and opportunity for America's young people*. Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20201120\\_BrookingsMetro-Work-based-learning\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20201120_BrookingsMetro-Work-based-learning_Final_Report.pdf). And Ross, M., Moore, K. A., Murphy, K., Bateman, N., DeMand, A., & Sacks, V. (2018). *Pathways to high-quality jobs for young adults*.

<sup>8</sup> National Equity Atlas. (n.d.). *Advancing racial equity in the workforce is a moral and economic imperative*. <https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/Workforce>

<sup>9</sup> Van Noy, M. (2021). *Career decision making and community college noncredit students: Lessons from the literature*. Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center. <https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/EERC/Decision%20making%20lit%20review%20final%202.15.2022.pdf>

# APPENDIX

## GENERATION WORK DEMOGRAPHICS

Phase I (2016–2021)				
Participants Served	Black	White	Latino	Two or More Races
~13,000 annually	48%	27%	14%	6%
Phase 2 (2022–2024)				
Participants Served	Black	White	Latino	Two or More Races
~7,800 annually	59%	14%	13%	5%

Note: Only the four largest participant demographics are listed in Phase 1 and Phase 2 tables.

## OUTCOMES

### Phase I

19,722

young people  
completed training.

77%

of those who completed a  
training program moved  
into employment or  
postsecondary education.

### Phase 2

The majority of young adults who completed a training program moved into jobs.

62%

of young adults who  
completed training were hired.

73%

remained employed for at least  
30 days after being hired.



## LEAP DEMOGRAPHICS

Enrollment in Job-Training and Postsecondary Programs (2016–2024)				
Participants Served	Black	White	Latino	Native American/ Alaska Native
5,628	31%	15%	35%	19%

## OUTCOMES

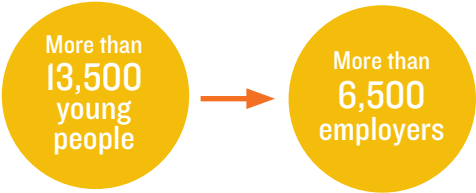


In all, **59%** of LEAP participants enrolled in postsecondary education, advanced training or another kind of certificate program — compared to national postsecondary enrollment rate of **38%** for 18- to 24-year-olds.

PAYA DEMOGRAPHICS

Youth Apprentice Participants (2023–2024)			
Black	White	Latino	Female
14%	49%	24%	28%

The 70 PAYA network members matched:



Between 2023 and 2024, the 14 PAYA grantees who received additional financial support matched:



In 2024, grantees offered 115 occupational apprenticeship pathways; 688 young people completed their apprenticeships — with a median starting apprenticeship wage of \$15 an hour and an average wage of \$14.87.

Apprenticeships led to full-time jobs with an average annual salary of \$53,996.



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