



ISSUE BRIEF

Centering a Holistic Approach to Expand Education and Employment Pathways for Systems-Involved Young People

An evaluation report for the LEAP initiative
Prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation | June 2024

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The LEAP Initiative

In 2016, the Annie E. Casey Foundation launched LEAP (Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential). This national initiative helps youth and young adults ages 14-25 who have been involved in the foster care or justice systems or who have experienced homelessness succeed in school and work, by **building and expanding education and employment pathways**. In the first three years of LEAP, 10 partnerships across the country adapted and implemented two evidence-based models – JAG (Jobs for America’s Graduates) and JFF’s Back on Track – with young people in their communities to improve connections to education and career opportunities.¹

In 2019, six of the LEAP partnerships (see sidebar) received additional funding to strengthen efforts to expand pathways to education and careers for young people. Through partnerships with public agencies (such as child welfare and juvenile justice), postsecondary education, housing, service providers and more, LEAP partners are working toward a **long-term goal of improving policies and practices to place more systems-involved young people on positive economic trajectories**.

Equal Measure² is serving as the evaluation and learning partner to better understand how LEAP partnerships are tackling the root causes of disconnection from education and careers that systems-involved youth experience in their communities. In 2023, we conducted a survey with LEAP leads at the six partnerships and interviewed LEAP national partners (see sidebar on next page), a set of organizations working closely with the partnerships to provide technical assistance and expertise in a variety of areas. This brief shares the key takeaways from these data; we will share additional learnings as we complete more extensive qualitative data collection in 2024.

How are the LEAP partnerships approaching changing systems to better serve young people?

LEAP partnerships are implementing many interrelated strategies to improve educational and work outcomes for systems-involved young people.

Participation in the LEAP initiative has encouraged local partnerships to develop or expand their strategies within their ecosystems to improve the conditions for

¹ MDRC completed an evaluation in 2019 of the first phase of LEAP focused on participant level outcomes on postsecondary and employment pathways. See MDRC evaluation reports: <https://www.mdrc.org/work/projects/learn-and-earn-achieve-potential-leap>

² <https://www.equalmeasure.org/>

LEAP Scaling and Systems Partnerships

Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD) (Los Angeles, CA) is a place-based community development corporation in South Los Angeles providing services such as youth and workforce development programming and housing and supportive services to young people ages 14-26.

Covenant House Alaska (Anchorage, AK) is the largest provider of services to homeless and runaway youth in the state of Alaska with a goal of moving youth from homelessness to stability.

The Door (New York, NY) empowers young people to meet their potential by providing comprehensive youth development services in a diverse and caring environment.

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (Lincoln, NE) is a statewide foundation providing funding and resources to communities to support family wellbeing, children’s educational success, and disconnected young people’s transition to adulthood.

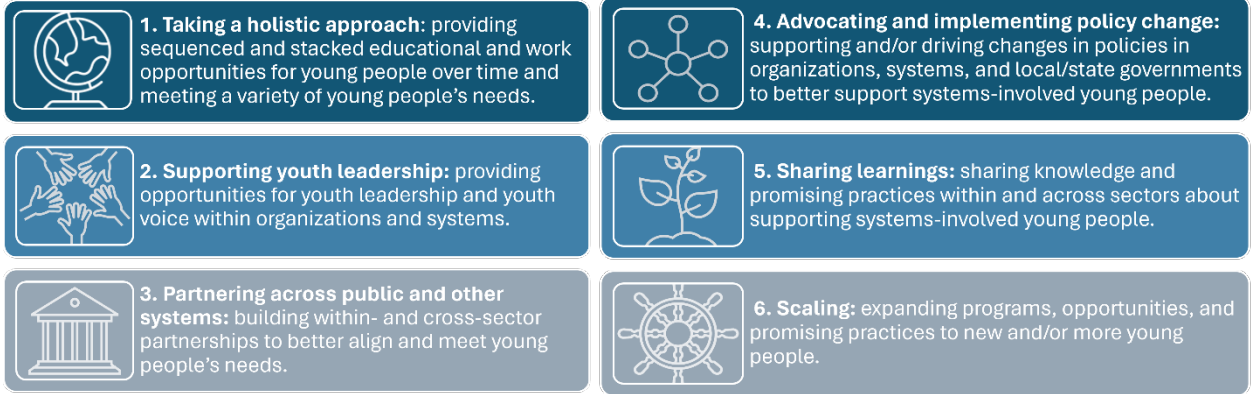
Project for Pride in Living (PPL) (Minneapolis, MN) builds the hopes, assets, and self-reliance of lower-income individuals and families by providing transformative affordable housing and career readiness services.

SBCS (San Diego, CA) provides youth and workforce development services designed to give to young people the skills they need to reach their full potential and give their best to themselves and their community.



young people to be able to succeed in school and work. LEAP partnerships are implementing six different but highly interrelated strategies (see Figure 1). These strategies aim to improve and strengthen the various systems that young people touch, acknowledging that the systems are flawed, not young people.

FIGURE 1: SIX STRATEGIES FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE



Examples of how LEAP partnerships are implementing multiple, interrelated strategies include:

- Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, with their partner Central Plains Center for Services, provides **personalized educational and career coaching** across the state. They are also **partnering** with postsecondary institutions to provide additional support to students as well as **advocating** for policy change to ease financial burdens for foster youth when they attend state colleges and universities.
- SBSC is working with justice-involved young people and youth in the foster care system. They are training staff to provide **bridging workshops** in justice facilities prior to release and **advocating** to improve housing laws and regulations for youth in the foster system.
- PPL is **partnering** with local counties to expand LEAP programming, is working with employers on an **apprenticeship program** with paid job training and classroom instruction and is continuing to **advocate** to remove barriers to employment such as expungement and easing access to drivers’ licenses.

LEAP National Partners
School & Main Institute (SMI): 1:1 customized technical assistance for each LEAP partnership
JAG (Jobs for America’s Graduates): technical assistance on the JAG model
Jobs for the Future (JFF): technical assistance on the Back on Track model
Urban Institute: technical assistance to the young parent cohort
Opportunity Youth United: technical assistance on youth leadership and community action teams



Taking a holistic approach is the dominant and overarching strategy that LEAP partnerships are implementing.

"So holistic support, I think this has been a strength. I think this has been a big area of focus for the LEAP partnerships. ... there are tons of examples of how they [LEAP partners] have tried to provide support, leverage support, connect young people to support, advocate for more permanent forms of support, whether it's driver's ed or driver's license or housing or whatever ... it's been a core piece of the learning... what kinds of supports do LEAP young people need, where do they get them?"

—LEAP national partner

LEAP partners describe taking a holistic approach by looking at the whole young person and all that surrounds them, including societal barriers to education and career growth as well as root causes of disconnection from education and career pathways. Taking this approach is particularly critical when working with systems-involved youth or youth who have experienced homelessness as their environments strongly impact their ability to succeed in work or school. LEAP partnerships recognize the need to help meet young people's basic needs and provide them with stability before they can connect them to, and support them to thrive in, education and career pathways. Success in pathways is not possible without meeting basic needs.

LEAP partnerships are taking a holistic approach in these ways:

- Creating "one-stop shops" either within their organizations or at partner sites to increase accessibility to multiple services and reduce barriers.
- Providing 1:1 case management, mentoring, and navigation with youth who are interacting with various systems. Consistent and personalized support improves access to needed services and aids in navigating complex systems.
- Providing access to food banks, clothing, hygiene, health services, housing, and other basic needs either through their own organizations or through partnerships and referrals.

"Systems in [our state], not unlike everywhere else, were treating those kids as if they were eight or nine different kids. We have somebody who deals with anger management. We have somebody who deals with mental health. We have somebody who deals with workforce. We have your school. We have case managers for child welfare, and all of those folks treat you as if you're just theirs. For young people, it's very difficult to navigate."

—LEAP national partner

A successful holistic approach requires deep cross-sector partnerships.

Partnering with public and other systems is critical for developing pathways and meeting youth needs—for referrals, wrap-around supports, and expansion or growth of LEAP programming and core elements into local youth-serving systems. Because system-involved youth needs are complex, even "one-stop" or large direct service organizations need to develop internal partnerships, such as across departments, to connect youth to services that can meet their needs. In most communities, one organization cannot meet all the complex needs of systems-involved young people. Therefore, deep and coordinated



partnerships with external organizations – community-based organizations, government agencies, etc. – to meet the variety of needs (housing, food, health, clothing, safety, access to benefits) are essential. In turn, LEAP organizations may rely on partners as referral sources into their pathway programs, which also require partnerships with educational institutions, employers, and workforce development to connect youth and bridge them across sequenced and stacked educational and work opportunities.

Examples of partnerships to meet youth needs and connect them to pathways include:

- To reach indigenous youth in a more distant and rural part of the state, Covenant House Alaska developed cross-sector partnerships with tribal corporations, the local school district, employers, and direct service providers (mental health, homeless, substance abuse) to build trust and expand capacity to serve young people.
- The Door partners with local community colleges to provide young people they serve with access to a variety of career pathways that meet their interests.
- CRCDC partners with the L.A. Department of Children and Family Services and SLATE-Z, a cross-sector collective impact effort, to better support and remove barriers for youth aging out of foster care.

Taking a holistic approach necessitates listening to young people and supporting youth leadership.

According to LEAP partners, in order to meet youth needs, partnerships and programs need to allow young people frequent and varied opportunities to share their stories and name their needs, interests, and desires. Providing these opportunities and listening to young people helps partners know what types of support young people need and thereby strengthens the holistic support provided. Meeting youth needs also means building up their confidence and self-efficacy, leadership skills, and voice.

LEAP partnerships are increasingly centering youth voice in program development, advocacy, and continuous improvement processes. LEAP leads note that supporting youth leadership has had a powerful impact — leading to more systems-involved young people advocating for themselves and their peers. For example, youth council members at The Door help inform systems and processes on behalf of themselves and their peers. LEAP partnerships also note the need to be highly adaptable as consistently engaging young people, especially those with systems-involvement, can be challenging due to varying degrees of capacity to engage.

"I really have loved watching the formalization of a youth voice piece of the work. We had young people involved from the very beginning. I don't know necessarily that we have the perfect strategy, but the goal of really practicing what we preach and really having an intentional way to do young people and figure out how to do that in a way that it works for them too. I think local partnerships and I have had learning around that. We want to have these opportunities. But we're dealing with LEAP young people who have an awful lot on their plates. And so we've got to be really thoughtful and creative about how we do that."

—LEAP national partner



Examples of how LEAP partnerships are engaging young people in leadership opportunities include:

- All partnerships elicit youth input and feedback through work groups, committees, and/or advisory boards.
- Most partnerships have hired youth as paid staff. For example, SBCS hired a former LEAP participant as a peer mentor/intake specialist for their WIOA work readiness programing working with justice-impacted youth.
- Covenant House Alaska’s Board of Directors includes a young person and former participant.
- The Door hosted a panel of youth with experience in the foster system with the City’s child welfare agency so they could hear directly from young people about their experiences in the system, their needs, and how things might be different. The Door also responded to the changing youth needs that they heard by adding support for parenting young people.

Looking Ahead

LEAP partnerships are taking a comprehensive approach to long-term change in their communities and improving educational, human service, and justice and workforce systems so that they better serve and meet the complex needs of young people. The work is challenging—and yet, by taking a holistic approach and always centering the needs of young people and building understanding of their barriers and the root causes of those barriers, LEAP partnerships – and others in the sector — can begin to make small changes in practices and policies. As the LEAP initiative comes to a close in 2024, we will be sharing more lessons from the evaluation, including approaches to changing local ecosystems to better connect systems-involved young people to promising education and career pathways.

To learn more about the LEAP initiative and its evolution over the past eight years, please visit: <https://www.aecf.org/work/economic-opportunity/work-education-and-income/learn-and-earn-to-achieve-potential>.

Acknowledgements

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LEAP Partners:
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Covenant House Alaska
The Door
Nebraska Children and Families Foundation
Project for Pride in Living.
SBCS

National Partners:
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