



PRACTICE BRIEF

K-12 Career Exploration

Laying the Groundwork for Effective Career Exploration

What Schools, Systems, and Partners Need in Place

Farhana Hossain

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PROJECT
EVIDENT

About this brief

Project Evident conducted an evidence and opportunity assessment of career exploration in middle and high schools between December 2025 and May 2026, with funding and support from the Walton Family Foundation and Britebound.

The assessment brings together evidence and practice knowledge across youth development, career development, education, and workforce research, with insights and context from interviews and roundtables with practitioners, researchers, and state and district leaders. The goal is to take stock of existing evidence and knowledge, understand how career exploration is being defined and delivered, and identify pressing gaps that need to be filled to allow practitioners, funders, and policymakers to deliver meaningful outcomes for middle school and high school learners. The assessment aggregates and builds on existing research and analyses across the field, including Britebound and Education Strategy Group's [national scan](#) of middle school career exploration, and does not include a state-by-state analysis of career exploration.

This brief looks at the on-the-ground conditions that shape career exploration practices and youth experiences and at what we heard from our field engagement around priorities for change.

- It is a supplement to the [Making Career Exploration Count](#) White Paper, which synthesizes the key findings from the scan and presents a framework and recommendations for improving career exploration practices and evidence base.
- It also accompanies [What Works in Career Exploration](#) Evidence Brief, which synthesizes existing research on the components of high-quality exploration and what studies show about outcomes for different practices and program models.

This assessment was conducted by Farhana Hossain, Gabriel Rhoads, Greg Keough, Megan Hoffman, and Matt Hillard at Project Evident, and this report was written by Farhana Hossain. Jamie Jutila and Simran Mathews at the Walton Family Foundation and Annie Duong-Turner at Britebound provided critical thought partnership and guidance that shaped this work.

About Project Evident

Project Evident harnesses the power of data, evidence, and technology to achieve greater impact. We believe that by empowering practitioners to drive their own data and evidence building while also strengthening the surrounding ecosystem, we can increase the number of effective solutions in the social and education sectors and scale them faster, ultimately producing better, faster, cheaper, and more equitable outcomes for students and communities.



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The findings and conclusions contained in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the funders or those who participated in this assessment.



Overview and Key Takeaways

Effective career exploration builds both awareness and readiness: what young people understand about themselves and the world of work, and the skills, relationships, and capacity to act on that understanding.

Many states and districts are expanding career exploration across middle and high schools, and schools and organizations are strengthening their programs and practices. At the same time, many students experience career exploration as a set of disconnected activities that do not collectively support meaningful learning, reflection, and decision-making. Opportunities for deep self-discovery, hands-on experiences, and supportive relationships are not equally available across communities.¹

Educators, practitioners, and state and district leaders who participated in this assessment named long-standing barriers: fragmented funding, misaligned incentives, inadequate staffing and capacity, and limited data infrastructure. This brief looks at the conditions that shape those practices and youth experiences, and the priorities for change that education leaders, practitioners, and researchers raised in interviews for this scan.²

- **Career exploration should be integrated with school and academics.**
Students are more likely to make meaning from exploration when it is connected to classroom learning, course choices, and the decisions they are preparing to make. In practice, competing instructional priorities, rigid schedules, and limited coordination between school-day and out-of-school programs often leave exploration peripheral or disconnected.³
- **Educators and practitioners need preparation, time, and clearly defined roles.**
Teachers, counselors, career coaches, and youth-serving practitioners are often expected to support exploration without sufficient training, practical tools, planning time, or clarity about responsibility. Expanding programs without addressing these capacity constraints can increase the number of activities without improving the quality of students' experiences.⁴

¹ Solberg et al. (2024); Cuevas and Sileo (2025); Storlie et al. (2019); Britebound and Education Strategy Group (2024); Britebound (2025)

² All examples and descriptions in this brief reflect conditions during the assessment period (December 2025–May 2026), as documented in the companion [White Paper](#) and [Evidence Brief](#).

³ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2025); Smith et al. (2020); Woo et al. (2026); Project Evident interviews (2026)

⁴ Cuevas and Sileo (2025); Gallup and Walton Family Foundation (2026); Project Evident interviews (2026)



- **Employer and community partnerships require dedicated infrastructure.**
Hands-on experiences and relationships with adults are among the parts of exploration that young people value most, but they are difficult to provide consistently.⁵ Sustained partnerships require outreach, relationship management, logistical coordination, preparation for adults working with youth, and structures that do not rely solely on individual champions.⁶
- **Funding and accountability should support meaningful quality and outcomes.**
Funding is often fragmented, short-term, and focused on specific programs or activities. Accountability systems commonly track whether students participated or completed a requirement, but provide less information about what students learned, how the experience affected them, or whether it strengthened their skills, confidence, relationships, and capacity to navigate choices.⁷

Taken together, these findings point to what the field needs most: investment in the staffing, training, partnerships, coordination, and data systems that make high-quality implementation possible, alongside continued efforts to expand access.

The field also needs stronger evidence on how career exploration is delivered. In addition to asking whether programs and practices lead to positive outcomes, practitioners, policymakers, and funders need to understand how different design choices, staffing models, partnerships, technologies, and delivery structures shape the quality and equity of students' experiences. Building that evidence alongside implementation will make it possible to improve promising approaches, adapt them across contexts, and sustain them over time.

The sections that follow look at each of these conditions in turn, starting with how career exploration connects to school and academics.

⁵ Britebound and Education Strategy Group (2024); Britebound (2025); Britebound (2026b); Gallup and Walton Family Foundation (2025); College Board (2024); Advance Vermont (2026); Connections Academy and Pearson (2024); Ali et al. (2025); Storlie et al. (2019)

⁶ Briggs et al. (2019); Patterson and Carson (2021); Ross et al. (2020); Equal Measure (2023); Getting Smart and GPS Education Partners (2020); CAPS Network (2019)

⁷ Cuevas and Sileo (2025); Robinson et al. (2025); Advance CTE and Education Strategy Group (2022); Jobs for the Future (2024); Project Evident field interviews (2026)



Integration with School and Academics

Evidence suggests that career exploration is more likely to support youth outcomes when it is connected to what students are learning at school and built into the school day as a consistent part of their experience.

International evidence, including recent research from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), finds that career exploration in adolescence is associated with later labor-market outcomes. This research points to the value of repeated opportunities, preparation and reflection, and connections between career experiences, classroom learning, and planning.⁸ Evidence-informed implementation guidance from the Institute of Education Sciences asks schools to integrate employability skills into core courses, provide professional development or real-world experiences to content-area teachers, and make time for teachers and counselors to plan lessons with career and technical education (CTE) staff to integrate career applications into academic courses.⁹ Educators and practitioners say that those conditions are difficult to create in practice.

Schools often lack the conditions needed to integrate career exploration consistently into a student's day. Educators lack the time, planning support, or curricular resources to draw explicit links between what students are learning in core subjects and the world of work, which leaves exploration disconnected from their academic experience. Instructional requirements, testing and college-readiness pressures, graduation requirements, and other competing priorities can also make it difficult to create dedicated time for exploration in students' and educators' schedules.¹⁰

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There are structural capacity issues that prevent career exploration from being really folded into the fabric of curriculum and instruction in most schools, and until [career exploration] is treated as a shared responsibility, we're going to continue having circular conversations about who owns this.”

– Researcher interviewed for landscape scan

⁸ Covacevich et al. (2021); Mann et al. (2020); Smith et al. (2020); Akos et al. (2011); Orthner et al. (2013); Woolley et al. (2013)

⁹ Smith et al. (2020)

¹⁰ Project Evident interviews (2026); Pekarcik (2023); Klein (2020); Akos et al. (2011)



In addition, afterschool programs, summer learning, and community-based youth programs reach many students who have limited access to exploration during the school day, but their link to classroom learning is often loose — in part because funding structures, accountability systems, and programmatic goals differ across school-day and out-of-school providers, making intentional coordination the exception rather than the norm.¹¹

Looking Ahead

Policies expanding career exploration should invest in the infrastructure that enables schools and their partners to more effectively integrate exploration into the school day.

This includes scheduling flexibility, shared curricular tools, and professional learning that fits within educators' existing roles. A few states have begun integrating exploration into core instruction. Maryland, for example, helps teachers connect career preparation to core subjects through content-area guidebooks.¹² Massachusetts is considering new graduation requirements that would, among other things, require students to develop and maintain an individual career and academic plan to connect career exploration to course selections and longer-term academic planning.¹³

Systemic coordination and partnership between in-school services and out-of-school programs should also be incentivized, so that the developmental experiences students have outside the classroom reinforce what they learn in school. Research on afterschool programs suggests that programs are better positioned to support college and career readiness when out-of-school providers explicitly align their activities to school-day goals and student supports.¹⁴ In addition, recent research on academic alignment between school-day and afterschool programs suggests that coordination tends to be stronger where the two settings share staff, curricular resources, student data, and regular planning time, and where a designated staff member links the two.¹⁵

¹¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2025); Kazis (2016); Woo et al. (2026)

¹² Maryland State Department of Education (n.d.)

¹³ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2025)

¹⁴ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2025); Woo et al. (2026)

¹⁵ Woo et al. (2026)



Educator and Practitioner Capacity

Educators, counselors, and youth-serving practitioners are often asked to support career exploration without adequate preparation and guidance to do it well, and their responsibilities are not always well defined.

Teachers and school counselors often receive limited preparation specifically focused on career exploration. Their preparation generally emphasizes instruction, social-emotional support, and academic and college advising. As a result, many educators feel more confident supporting postsecondary routes that are most familiar to them, as opposed to guiding broader exploration of career identity and emerging pathways. The preparation gap extends to staff in out-of-school programs and intermediaries, not all of whom have the training or field background to engage effectively with young people.¹⁶

Many educators are not positioned to treat career exploration as a core part of their role.

A 2026 survey found that whether career exploration is part of a teacher's job remains undefined: Only 24 percent of high school teachers and 11 percent of middle school teachers feel "a great deal" of responsibility for helping students explore which career they want to pursue. In many communities, career exploration is not clearly defined or built into educators' responsibilities. Even where career exploration is part of defined roles, time and staffing structures limit what educators can do at scale.¹⁷

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When you adopt a new English curriculum, your entire English faculty goes through a lot of professional development, and they're already specialists. We don't typically do that in this career exploration world.

– State education leader interviewed for landscape scan

Large classes, high counselor caseloads, and competing responsibilities can limit the time educators have for individualized student support and coordination with families and community partners.¹⁸ About 84 percent of public K-12 teachers say they do not have enough time during regular work hours to accomplish all that is expected of them.¹⁹ Student-to-counselor ratios also remain high: Nationally, there were about 370 students for

¹⁶ Project Evident interviews (2026); Cuevas and Sileo (2025); National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2025); Parola et al. (2024); Sherman-Morris et al. (2019)

¹⁷ Gallup and Walton Family Foundation (2026); Project Evident interviews (2026)

¹⁸ Blatchford and Russell (2021); American School Counselor Association (2021, 2026); Gallup, Walton Family Foundation, and Jobs for the Future (2025)

¹⁹ Lin et al. (2024)



every school counselor in 2024–25, well above the recommended level of 250 students per counselor.²⁰

Looking Ahead

Investments in career exploration should address the challenges of preparation, time, and ownership that currently limit implementation. Educators need clearly defined roles, professional development, and scheduled structures that make space for this work, along with stronger expectations around responsibilities and accountability. Some states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, and North Carolina, are expanding career coaching or counseling for secondary students through a mix of state funding, local education agency allocations, and partnerships with community colleges, workforce boards, or regional intermediaries.²¹ Vermont is expanding the role of teachers, employers, and community mentors in helping students explore career options and develop postsecondary plans.²²

Teacher externships, where educators spend time in industry settings, have also emerged in several states as a strategy to build educators' familiarity with the world of work.²³ For example, Colorado, Texas, and Iowa offer state-supported teacher externship programs that place educators in business or industry settings to help them connect classroom learning to real-world applications.²⁴

²⁰ American School Counselor Association (2026)

²¹ Alabama Department of Education (2024); Arkansas Department of Education (2025); AccelerateMS (2024); Maryland State Department of Education (2025); North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges (2025)

²² Advance Vermont (2026)

²³ Bauer (n.d.); Lattanze (2025b)

²⁴ Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (n.d.); Iowa Department of Education (n.d.); Workforce Solutions Deep East Texas (n.d.)



Partnerships and Employer Engagement

Quality career exploration opportunities for students require intentional, sustained partnerships between schools, employers, and community-based organizations. In practice, these partnerships are often constrained by resources and capacity, and the structural challenges of sustaining employer engagement at scale.

Many schools and youth programs do not have the dedicated staffing, time, and systems needed to build and sustain the employer and community partnerships required for high-quality exploration.

Evidence from the field suggests that employer and partner engagement for career-connected activities should be a specialized role encompassing outreach, relationship management, program design, and quality tracking — functions that are distinct from the daily responsibilities of teachers and counselors.

In practice, these responsibilities are often distributed among existing school staff who lack sufficient training, time, or support for employer engagement. This limits their ability to design experiences that support skill-building, relationships, and learning for their students or to prepare employer staff to work effectively with young people. Without institutionalized roles and structures, partnerships can be vulnerable to staff turnover, uneven engagement, and weak continuity.²⁵

Employer engagement efforts within communities are fragmented and can be difficult to sustain at scale. Employers across communities already participate in career exploration, and many can be willing partners when participation is structured around clear value and

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Employer engagement is a significant challenge. The turnover is high, but this work is developed on relationships. Educators work with students all through the day, and business people are like ‘we gotta schedule this now, we gotta get this locked in.’ They don’t get to emails often until 4 or 5 p.m, maybe several days later, when those opportunities have completely are gone. The nurturing to prepare that employer to be in the classroom, that takes people, that takes someone leading that work.

– Program leader interviewed for landscape scan

²⁵ Project Evident interviews (2026); Hossain, Keough, and Rhoads (2025); NAF (2026); Kistler and Dougherty (2025); Patterson and Carson (2021); Advance CTE and Education Strategy Group (2023); Ross et al. (2020); Robinson et al. (2025); Parton (2017); American Student Assistance (2022); Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (n.d.)



manageable expectations. The challenge is sustaining those partnerships at scale to produce opportunities consistently for all students.

- First, schools and programs frequently conduct their own outreach to employers, competing for limited employer resources and attention.
- Second, engagement often rests on individual champions at employer organizations, rather than an institution-wide commitment, which makes partnerships vulnerable to turnover and shifting priorities.
- Third, engaging employers in exploration for younger students can be especially challenging because the near-term workforce return may be less apparent.²⁶ Unlike apprenticeships or sector-focused training programs that can connect employers to a near-term talent pipeline, middle and early high school career exploration asks employers to invest time in providing experiences and relationships without an immediate workforce return.
- Finally, developing work-based opportunities presents additional challenges in navigating regulations and guidelines, including child labor laws and requirements around supervision and workplace safety.

In a national survey of 400 career and technical education practitioners, more than 40 percent of respondents named employer engagement as their top challenge. The most commonly cited barriers included difficulty aligning school schedules with employer needs (63 percent), liability concerns (55 percent), and employers not seeing the value of working with students (54 percent).²⁷

Looking Ahead

Schools and systems need dedicated staff or intermediaries to coordinate outreach and formalized employer-engagement roles at the district and school level. Many communities already use intermediaries or coordinating bodies to organize employer and partner engagement across districts and service providers, to centralize outreach, and to help schools and employers meet regulatory and logistical requirements. Delaware, for example, supports work-based learning through intermediaries that connect schools, employers, higher education, and community partners. In Maryland, the governor's office is [leading efforts](#) to align education, labor, and economic-development partners around

²⁶ Project Evident interviews (2026); Johnson (2022)

²⁷ YouScience (2025)



career-connected programs, and one focus of this work is better-coordinated employer-engagement roles across these partners.²⁸ Formalized employer-engagement roles at the district or school level are not yet widespread, though there are growing calls to fund and define them.²⁹

Reaching more employers, especially small and medium-sized businesses, will mean supporting a range of ways for them to participate in career exploration, from lower-commitment activities like guest speaking and workplace tours to higher-commitment roles like internships and project-based learning. Even where opportunities are formally available, transportation, scheduling, cost, and other participation barriers can limit which students can access them. Guidance on how to design and sequence these options for career exploration, especially in middle and early high school, is still thin, and the field would benefit from shared models and better data.³⁰

Stronger employer connections will also require building a clearer case for how employers benefit from career exploration and better evidence on broader returns for communities. Over time, the goal should be to transition from fragmented employer outreach and participation to shared responsibility for designing career exploration experiences for young people. Research on summer youth employment programs finds that employers are more likely to sustain engagement when outreach is tailored to their motivations — including workforce pipeline development and community investment goals — and when program staff reduce the logistical burden of hosting young people.³¹

²⁸ Governor's Workforce Development Board (2026)

²⁹ Project Evident interviews (2026); Advance CTE and Education Strategy Group (2023); Cuevas and Sileo (2025); Equal Measure (2023); NGA Center (2021)

³⁰ CAPS Network (2019); Briggs et al. (2019); Patterson and Carson (2021); Catalyze (2025); Britebound (2024); Cox and Orell (2025); Shields et al. (2024); Robson, Schiess, and Lammers (2021); Parton (2017); Ross et al. (2020)

³¹ Briggs, Spievack, and Blount (2019)



Incentives and Accountability

Even when career exploration is named as a policy priority, state accountability systems and investments often continue to place greater weight on academic performance and college readiness.

Funding for career exploration is supported by a patchwork of federal funds, state appropriations, philanthropic investment, and local district dollars. Different funding streams support different grade bands, activities, eligibility, accountability, and performance measures.³² In this context, more funding can lead to more activities but does not always increase the quality or cohesiveness of career exploration opportunities and experiences.

Funding for capacity-building and infrastructure that makes program delivery possible remains harder to secure. Program dollars may support student activities, but the staffing and systems needed for partnership coordination, educator and employer preparation, consistent data collection, and quality improvement are less often funded. Additionally, public and philanthropic funding is often provided on a short-term basis through pilot grants or one-time appropriations, making it difficult to sustain exploration across grades. Districts that have developed successful models of providing career-connected learning have often done so by combining funding from education, workforce development, economic development, and philanthropic sources. That kind of collaboration can expand what is possible but also requires significant coordination, shared governance, and sustained capacity, which are not yet consistently in place across communities.³³

Accountability measures tend to focus on compliance and student participation rather than outcomes. Many states and districts track participation, completion, or whether students meet career-readiness standards. But few collect data that would allow them to

“All of [the accountability and data systems schools use to track career readiness] are measuring adult behaviors — are they complying — not student impact.

– Youth practitioner interviewed for landscape scan

³² Cuevas and Sileo (2025); NGA Center (2021); Advance CTE and Education Strategy Group (2022); Robinson et al. (2025); Solberg et al. (2024); Staklis et al. (2020)

³³ Project Evident interviews (2026); Robinson et al. (2025); Downs and Polk (2025); Advance CTE and Education Strategy Group (2022); Robson, Schiess, and Lammers (2021); National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (2021); American Student Assistance (2022); Canney and Mezera (2020); Shields et al. (2024)



assess the nature, duration, quality, or context of students' experiences, or whether those experiences improve their knowledge, beliefs, skills, or planning.³⁴

Although many states have begun building longitudinal data systems that link data across K–12, postsecondary, and workforce systems, states' ability to consistently connect specific middle and high school career exploration or work-based learning experiences to later postsecondary enrollment, employment, or earnings remains limited. That makes it difficult to track students across their educational trajectory and assess the longer-term returns of these experiences.³⁵ These gaps in measurement and data collection point to a more foundational challenge: there is not yet broad agreement on a shared definition of high-quality career exploration or how it should be measured across settings.³⁶ Without shared outcomes and quality standards, it is difficult for states and communities to know how to measure outcomes and what data to collect.³⁷

Looking Ahead

Greater investments in the design and implementation of career exploration will need to be grounded in a clear vision for how they support specific student experiences, learning, and growth outcomes. States must align their funding, accountability, and measurement systems to create sustainable, high-quality career exploration that reaches every middle and high school student. In addition to funding individual programs and activities, funders and policymakers should invest in systems and capacity that enable educators and practitioners to effectively collaborate and deliver high-quality exploration, including investments in partnerships, professional development, and data systems. States also need measurement frameworks and data systems that track student experiences and progress over time, so that practitioners, policymakers, and researchers can assess outcomes and continuously improve youth experiences.

³⁴ Jobs for the Future (2024); Advance CTE and Education Strategy Group (2023); Shields et al. (2024); Education Commission of the States (2024); Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness (2024); Solberg et al. (2024); Staklis et al. (2020); Robson, Schiess, and Lammers (2021); Advance CTE and Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (2020)

³⁵ Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness (2024); Shields et al. (2024); Valle (2024); Advance CTE and Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (2020)

³⁶ Hossain, Keough, and Rhoads (2025); Cuevas and Sileo (2025); Advance CTE (2025); Project Evident interviews (2026); Canney and Mezera (2020); Advance CTE and Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (2020)

³⁷ Project Evident interviews (2026); Advance CTE (2025); Jobs for the Future (2024)



Conclusion

Career exploration will be more valuable for young people when it is connected to what they are learning at school and delivered by educators and practitioners who are prepared and supported.

Meaningful exploration also depends on durable community and employer partnerships that can consistently bring quality experiences and relationships into students' lives, and on funding and accountability systems that prioritize student outcomes. The work already underway in many states and districts across the country offers concrete examples of what investment in these conditions can look like. What the field needs now is sustained focus on the conditions that make quality exploration possible, paired with the evidence-building capacity to learn and improve over time.

In addition to strengthening the evidence for *whether* different types of exploration programs and practices lead to positive outcomes for young people, findings from this landscape scan also highlighted the need to advance evidence on *how* exploration can drive outcomes. Practitioners, researchers, and education leaders who participated in interviews for this scan emphasized gaps in the field's understanding of how design and implementation choices affect youth experiences.

These questions cluster in a few areas: designing and integrating high-quality exploration, building the capacity of the educators and partners who deliver it, and aligning the funding, data, and systems that sustain it at scale.³⁸ The learning agenda on the next page summarizes some of these questions.³⁹

Building evidence around these questions will require coordinated investments in data, research, and evaluations, alongside investments in exploration programs and infrastructure.⁴⁰ This includes testing design choices, comparing models, and learning from the experiences of schools, providers, employers, and young people. Without investments in actionable evidence and learning, we risk expanding the scale of career exploration faster than our collective ability to learn what works, for whom, and under what circumstances.

³⁸ Project Evident interviews (2026); Hossain, Keough, and Rhoads (2025)

³⁹ These questions echo themes and questions surfaced in Project Evident's [2025 Career Pathways Evidence Assessment](#) and complement the evidence gaps identified in the [companion Evidence Brief](#).

⁴⁰ Hossain, Keough, and Rhoads (2025); Jobs for the Future (2024); Equal Measure (2023)



A Learning Agenda for Delivering High-Quality Career Exploration

In conversations with Project Evident, education leaders, practitioners, and researchers highlighted several gaps in our knowledge of how to design and deliver quality exploration.

Design

- How can career exploration be integrated effectively across instruction and the whole-school experience?
- How can schools and districts use technology most effectively to support implementation and outcomes at scale, including to foster the relationships, networks, and hands-on experiences students value most?
- What are effective ways to involve families and peers in supporting exploration?

Talent, Training, and Tools

- What competencies, tools, and training do educators, counselors, career coaches, and other practitioners need to design and deliver high-quality exploration, and what support is most effective?
- How can schools, providers, and intermediaries train and support employers to create experiences that benefit young people?
- How can states and districts provide up-to-date labor market and pathways data to guide exploration and decision-making?

Resources and Partnerships

- What staffing, partnership, and resource allocation models work in different contexts and geographies? How can communities and districts with fewer resources tailor programs and practices to meet the needs of their students?
- How can states and localities engage employers systemically to reduce the burden on individual schools and providers and streamline coordination?
- What would it take to move from strong individual employer partnerships to cross-institutional and industry-wide collaboration?



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