FutureEd
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

A New Bipartisan Education Agenda

BY BRUNO V. MANNO AND LYNN OLSON

After nearly four decades, the bipartisan coalition that pushed higher standards, tests, and accountability systems to improve public education has fractured. While standards-based reform lifted student achievement, especially for Black and Hispanic students who had long been marginalized in American education, it also generated a backlash against what critics charged were a preoccupation with test scores and an overly punitive stance toward teachers and schools.

But a nascent movement to expand students' opportunities to acquire critical knowledge, skills and social networks by abandoning a "bachelor's degree or bust" mentality in favor of multiple pathways to opportunity based on students' passions and purposes could forge the next bipartisan consensus on education.

This new opportunity agenda differs sharply from vocational education of old that placed students into different tracks and occupational destinations based mostly on family background. That sorting process often carried with it racial, ethnic, and social-class biases, with immigrant students, low-income students, and students of color typically enrolled in low-level academic and vocational training and middle- and upper-class White students enrolled in academic, college-preparatory classes. Educators often described vocational programs as dumping grounds for students thought incapable of doing serious academic work, as Jeannie Oakes and her colleagues at the RAND Corporation found in their seminal 1992 report ***Educational Matchmaking*****.**

In contrast, the new career pathways emerging around the country exemplify what University of Texas law professor Joseph Fishkin calls **opportunity pluralism**, a move to make the nation's opportunity infrastructure more pluralistic by offering individuals more pathways to success.

A confluence of factors is fueling the new opportunity agenda. The **rising cost** of a college degree is leading many students to think they cannot afford college despite research showing that college graduates earn far more over their lifetimes than nongraduates. An **increasing number** of well-paying jobs do not require a bachelor's degree but do require technical skills and credentials beyond high school. And the **science of learning** and development has emphasized the need to broaden education's focus beyond academics to incorporate young people's social-emotional development, including their search for identity, belonging, and agency.

The need to rethink the connection between K-12 education and careers garners strong support from parents and young people. In a recent nationally representative survey of public and private school parents conducted by FIL Inc., two out of three would rethink "how we educate students, coming up with new ways to teach children." Eighty-two percent favor "work-based learning programs or apprenticeships in various career fields" and 80 percent support "more vocational classes in high schools."

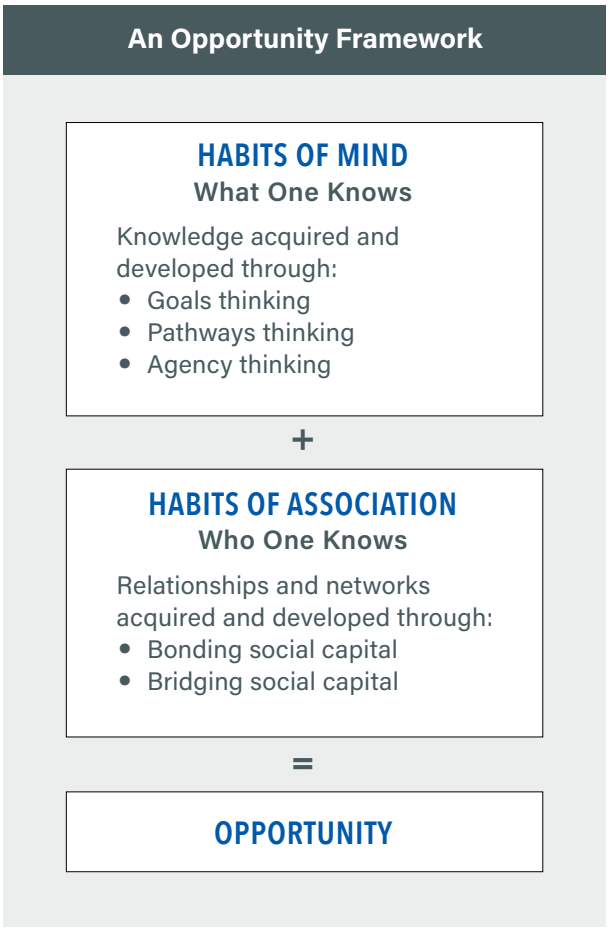
For their part, the nation's more than 72 million young adults born between 1981 and 1996 express a sense of buyer's remorse about their high school educations: Only some 22 percent say high school prepared them for workforce success.

II

The essential elements of the opportunity agenda are what students know (knowledge) and whom they know (relationships). Beyond the acquisition of academic and technical skills, students also need to cultivate other habits of mind and associations as the building blocks of individual opportunity. We call them habits because pursuing knowledge and relationships requires behaviors learned and internalized through practice. These habits are also character strengths that lead to the building of democratic, civic communities. Together, they enable the pursuit of opportunity.

Habits of mind comprise three types of thinking: goals thinking (defining and setting achievable outcomes); pathways thinking (creating a route to these outcomes); and agency thinking (pursuing goals and pathways through personal agency and self-efficacy). Pathways and agency thinking together foster the pursuit of goals, helping students overcome life obstacles.

Habits of association include two kinds of social capital networks: "bonding" and "bridging." Bonding social capital occurs within a group, reflecting the need to be with others for emotional support and companionship. Bridging social capital occurs between social groups, reflecting the need to connect with individuals different than ourselves, expanding our social circles across demographics and interests.



Bonding and bridging social capital are complementary. As social scientist Xavier de Souza Briggs **notes**, binding social capital is for "getting by," and bridging social capital is for "getting ahead."

Economist Glenn C. Loury suggests that social capital may be an **essential prerequisite** for creating what economists call human capital, the experiences, skills, training, education, and acquired social aptitudes that determine individuals' earning power and, thus, their ability to generate and accumulate wealth.

Social capital operates on multiple levels: the relationships between individuals, such as between young people and prospective employers; the relationships with mid-level groups or firms, such as between young people and local community organizations; and the relationships with courts and other large local and national institutions that order society and that we often think of as civic capital. In short, opportunity equals knowledge plus an ever-expanding set of networks that center young people in society.

Understanding opportunity through a prism of knowledge and networks is a way to frame a bipartisan conversation about the role of schools and other community institutions in student success. It has the potential to unite divergent political orientations and beliefs by encouraging and enabling individuals, schools, community organizations and local enterprises to work together—expanding their relationships, networks, and social circles to advance opportunity and engendering an understanding of relationships as valuable resources.

III

Today's opaque education credentialing process for work and careers too often serves as a bottleneck, rather than a bridge, to opportunity for young people. As a result, young people have **different levels of confidence** in their ability to set occupational goals and develop pathways to reach them. Young people from households with lower incomes, in particular, report feeling more pressured to make premature occupational choices in part because of the financial risks associated with longer periods of education and career exploration. Black and Hispanic young people understand the impact supportive adults can have in their lives but don't always know where or how to find them.

To ensure that young people are empowered to choose the pathways and connections that are right for them, the new opportunity agenda recognizes that students need:

Academics + Technical Skills. The new opportunity agenda builds on the history of standards-based reform by recognizing that all young people need a strong foundation of academic skills—but they also need the opportunity to begin acquiring technical skills in high school that can give them a jump start on careers.

Credentials + Networks. Although equalizing opportunity along the pathway from high school graduation to a bachelor's degree remains an important policy goal, the new opportunity agenda focuses on the creation of multiple pathways to success through the acquisition of credentials that are valued in the labor market and that young people can begin earning in high school.

These credentials should both certify young people's employability based on key skill sets and serve as building blocks toward associate's and bachelor's degrees, through the expansion of such pathways as dual-enrollment programs and early college high schools.

Equally important is connecting young people with adults who can serve as mentors and bridge builders to viable careers. This is particularly important for young people in high-poverty communities who may lack connections to adults in their chosen career fields.

Agency + Advising. To avoid tracking young people into jobs based on race, ethnicity, gender, and social class, the new opportunity agenda must include a strong system of advising and early career exploration so that young people are knowledgeable and empowered to choose the pathways that are right for them, rather than having pathways chosen for them.

These principles lead to five essential features of pathways programs that can guide coalition efforts at the local and state levels:

Academic Core and a Credential. Programs have a clear curriculum that combines academic and technical skills and is aligned with labor market needs—i.e., supply and demand are linked. There is a well-defined timeline for program completion. Upon completion, participants receive a recognized career credential. In the best of circumstances, there is a good job waiting for the program graduate.

Exposure to Work and Careers. Programs are structured to introduce young people to work and careers no later than middle school, through activities like guest speakers and field trips. High school includes career exposure through work placement, including mentorships and internships. Work-based learning is integrated into classroom instruction. It is also used as a motivational strategy challenging young people with genuine tasks so they understand labor market demands—both academic and technical knowledge and "soft skills" like the ability to communicate clearly through writing and speaking.

A Strong System of Advising. Programs include a robust advisory component to ensure that students are making informed choices about their chosen pathways; address potential barriers, such as financial assistance; and use data to keep students on track to their goals.

Authentic Partnerships. Employers, industry associations, and other local institutions collaborate in this effort. Employers help set program standards and define skills and competencies needed for certification and employment and provide paid apprenticeships. Others assist with convening, planning, and work placement navigation and social support services for participants (and their families). There are written agreements between partners that delineate roles and responsibilities. They include budgets.

Supporting Policies. Policy leaders play a critical role in these programs, since local, state, and federal policies create a framework for the programs' development and expansion. The policy framework includes executive orders and federal, state, and local directives. For example, a policy that creates incentives for K-12, postsecondary institutions, labor, and workforce groups to integrate their funding streams enables long-term financial support for pathways programs.

Together, these elements of successful pathway programs help young people develop an **occupational identity** and a **vocational self**, as well as a broader sense of who they are as adults, something that should be a key focus of schools preparing young people for civic responsibility.

IV

Importantly, the opportunity agenda requires a shift away from traditional notions of success centered on advanced degrees, status, and wealth. And there's evidence that that is happening.

In 2019, Gallup and the think tank **Populace** conducted wide-ranging interviews and a survey with a nationally representative sample of 5,242 adults to create **The Success Index**, a portrait of what success means to Americans. In the course of their interviews, they learned that while many individuals believe society's view of success is based on wealth and status, their personal definition of success is rooted in happiness, peace of mind, and a fulfilling life. They balanced education, work, and financial security with health, character, and the quality of personal relationships. Eighty-eight percent of respondents prioritized a "good, satisfying life" over a "successful life by society's definition."

A recent poll by **Echelon Insights**, conducted for the Walton Family Foundation, of Gen Z (ages 13 to 23) and Millennials (ages 24 to 39) on the American Dream and how they think about their futures yielded a similar perspective. Both groups described the dream as having the freedom and opportunity to build their lives on their own terms, having many paths to success.

Similarly, nearly 4,000 Black and Hispanic youth from all income levels and White youth from households with annual incomes less than $75,000 **reported** to Goodwin Simon Strategic Research that they aspire to a career that is fulfilling. They want to be well-connected and respected socially. And they want to give back to their communities. They see themselves as change agents but know they need connections and relationships to realize their goals.

On the employer side of the equation, the **Center on Education and the Workforce** at Georgetown University and the **Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland** have identified growing numbers of jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree. This middle-skills sector, where traditional blue-collar jobs are increasingly being replaced by skilled technical work, now represents nearly a quarter of all employment paying at least $35,000 a year.

Helping young people achieve their aspirations by making the nation's opportunity infrastructure more pluralistic, by providing young people with a greater range of pathways to pursue the knowledge and networks they need to achieve their aspirations and live flourishing lives, is an agenda for conservatives, moderates and liberals alike.

It offers a chance to put aside the divisive school reform debates of recent years and forge new and diverse coalitions of policymakers, advocates, funders and other civic entrepreneurs. It is, ultimately, a new civic equation that gives the nation's schools a key role in building new pathways to the future.

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Pathways Models

The breadth of the opportunity agenda is reflected in emerging state and local pathway programs. State examples highlight approaches by governors of different political parties, while the local examples highlight how organizations from many different sectors have united to build the new programs.

These programs include student-employer apprenticeships and internships, career and technical education, dual enrollment in high school and postsecondary institutions, job placement and training, career academies, boot camps for acquiring discrete knowledge and skills, and student staffing and placement services. Each reflects the importance of students acquiring knowledge and creating and leveraging social networks. Importantly, these programs are **faster and cheaper** pathways to jobs and careers than traditional education settings.

State Models

Delaware Pathways was established in 2014 by then-Democratic Governor Jack Markell to provide college and career preparation for students ages 12 to 19, providing them with school-to-careers pathways aligned with state and regional economic needs.

Middle-school students learn about career options and then take career-related courses when they become high school sophomores or juniors. High school students can take college classes at no cost to families, serve as interns, and earn work credentials. Beginning in the summer before senior year, students participate in a 240-hour paid internship that lasts through the academic year.

The program engages K–12 educators, businesses, postsecondary education, philanthropy, and community organizations. For example, Delaware Tech is the lead agency that arranges work-based experiences. United Way coordinates support services for low-income students. Boys and Girls Clubs and libraries provide after-school services.

Delaware currently offers pathways in fields like advanced manufacturing, engineering, finance, energy, CISCO networking, environmental science, and health care, focusing on so-called middle-skills jobs such as master electricians and dental hygienists.

More than 20,000 students are enrolled in the programs, more than half of the state's high school students. Many also take career-related courses at institutions of higher education and earn credit that can be applied to an associate's degree or other academic certificates.

The United Way of Delaware and the Rodel Foundation of Delaware have coordinated fundraising for the pathways program. Rodel is a supporting organization of the Delaware Community Foundation and as such can solicit and accept grant funding for the program, including state and federal dollars and corporate and private foundation support. The goal is for 60 percent of the funding to come from public sources and the balance from private sources.

Former Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam, a Republican, established the **Drive to 55 Alliance** in 2015, a partnership between the private sector and nonprofits intended to equip 55 percent of Tennesseans with a college degree or training certificate by 2025. Its five programs create partnerships among school districts, postsecondary institutions, employers, and community organizations.

Tennessee Promise Scholarships provide support for tuition and fees after other aid has been applied (so-called last-dollar support) for high school graduates attending community or technical colleges, including linking scholarship recipients with private sector volunteer mentors and nonprofit partners. A sister program, Tennessee Reconnect, offers last-dollar grants for adults to earn an associate's degree or technical certificate, tuition-free.

Tennessee Pathways promotes a college and career approach to K–12 schools and grants a Tennessee Department of Education **pathways certification** to programs with strong alignment among high school programs, postsecondary partners, and regional employment opportunities. The SAILS program is for high school students who did not reach the ACT college readiness benchmarks in mathematics. It provides in-person and online learning so students can complete math modules for postsecondary credit so they don't need remedial math in college.

The **Tennessee Labor Education Alignment Program** (LEAP) is directed to four-year postsecondary institutions. It links them with employers so colleges can offer programs aligned with actual employer workforce needs. Linking all these programs together is an online portal called **CollegeForTennessee**, providing planning tools for career and college for students, counselors, and educators.

All five programs are supported primarily by funds from the state's budget supplemented by dollars from the federal Carl D. Perkins Career Technical Education Act. Additional support comes from national and Tennessee-based foundations and individual donors.

Both Tennessee and Delaware are members of the Pathways to Prosperity Network, a collaboration of states and regions launched by Jobs for the Future, to develop college and career pathways.

Local Models

A growing number of civic entrepreneurs are creating innovative middle and high school designs that integrate schools and students with employers and work. They also create novel forms of social capital for young people by initiating new relationships that expand their knowledge and social networks. These programs combine habits of mind and association to lay a durable foundation so that young people have the knowledge and relationships that help them pursue opportunity. Here are seven examples.

School district, charter school, and university partnerships. Wiseburn School District in Los Angeles County and its partner Da Vinci Charter School have over one hundred business and nonprofit partners offering students programs that include internships, mentorships, workshops, boot camps, and consultancies, including student mental health and counseling services.

Students can also pursue associate's or bachelor's degree programs through UCLA Extension and El Camino College or College for America. The K-12 program is supported by public dollars from per pupil allotments and other state and local program support. Postsecondary Pell grants are used to support tuition and other allowable expenses. Some small support is received from foundations and individual donors.

Charter school and university partnerships. In Boston, Match Public Charter School, in partnership with Southern New Hampshire University, assists students with college completion and career placement, including student coaching and mentoring and accredited associate's and bachelor's degrees. The program includes comprehensive career services like job searches and support through the hiring process for up to two years after graduation.

Duet, an online career-counseling service, receives fee-for-service income from Southern New Hampshire University for counseling and other student support services. Students receive federal student aid through Pell grants to pay for postsecondary education costs. Private dollars supplement these revenue streams. Duet projects that when enrollment doubles from its current 400 students to 800 students, the program will no longer need private dollars.

Catholic school and corporate partnerships. Cristo Rey is a network of 35 Catholic high schools in 22 states that integrates four years of academics with work experience through its corporate work-study program. This separate nonprofit places students in an entry-level professional job at one of their 3,400 corporate partners for five days a month. Forty percent of students are not Catholic and 98 percent are students of color. Students earn 60 percent of tuition through employment, with the balance coming from fundraising and a small family contribution. In some states, Cristo Rey is able to access public dollars from K-12 school choice programs.

Public-private partnerships. The Atlanta business community, Fulton County Schools, and Junior Achievement created 3-D Education (3-DE), a public-private partnership. This project-based learning approach includes a six-week case study beginning in eleventh grade that pairs students with coaches in off-campus industrial and professional settings. Examples of the workforce pathways they offer students include business and technology, entrepreneurship, marketing and management, and financial services. Support for 3-DE operational costs come from local philanthropies, with all school-related program costs paid for by the school district's per-pupil allocations.

Citywide partnerships. In New Orleans, the education, business, and civic partnership YouthForce NOLA works with open enrollment charter high schools, offering career exposure and work experiences, soft-skills training, coaching for students, and paid student internships for seniors. This is followed by 90 hours of work placement in a career pathway where opportunities include biology and health sciences, digital media and IT, and skilled crafts like architecture and water management. It also has a family engagement program educating parents about the career pathways program. Financial support comes mostly from philanthropic organizations, though local government support pays for workforce youth intern stipends.

Postsecondary expansion. Southern New Hampshire University recently purchased the Indianapolis-based Kenzie Academy, a venture-funded technology and apprenticeship program for young people, including high school graduates, formerly incarcerated individuals, and those with master's degrees seeking new jobs. The academy offers credentialed online programs in software engineering and UX Design with an apprenticeship in Kenzie Studio, the company's consulting arm. To make the programs accessible, students have an income-sharing agreement that delays tuition payment until they have a job paying at least $40,000. The program is now a nonprofit operating division of SNHU.

Technology support. Finally, many communities use technology platforms to build virtual mentoring opportunities and networks between students and community partners. Examples include CommunityShare, Imblaze, and Nepris. All these programs use online networks and resources to connect community members, industry professionals, parents, and organizations with educators who want to create real-world learning opportunities for their students.

Non-School Models

Innovative career pathways also are springing up outside of the K-12 system to diversify young adults' career options after high school.

Two-year, four-year college collaborations. Come to Believe Network is a two-year commuter community college program with its own full-time faculty and year-round calendar. It is housed and hosted by a four-year institution that provides shared resources such as facilities, back-office services, library and other academic supports, and career services. It offers associate's degrees and provides students with such support services as meals, laptops, tutoring, and career development. Counselors help students explore careers and pursue job searches. They also work with employers to recruit students seeking work experience and employment. Students earn degrees prepared for the workforce or a four-year institution with little or no debt.

Statewide programs. Building Futures is a Rhode Island Registered Apprenticeship program that works with 29 public, private, and nonprofit organizations on apprenticeships in such fields as construction, health care, manufacturing, commercial fisheries, information technology, and marine trades. It partners with the Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training, Department of Transportation, and Office of Civil Rights. Employers co-design programs with Building Futures staff and fund student training, with a focus on individuals from low-income backgrounds. The program includes work placement and wage progression. Apprentices earn a credential accepted by industries and employers across the United States.

Postsecondary partnerships. CodePath is a national nonprofit that prepares underserved populations for technical careers. It partners with over 50 universities and 50 companies to offer no-cost coding courses, mentorships, and career support. CodePath supplements college-level courses with campus-based and online computer science courses, taught by tech company instructors, with about half offered for academic credit. Students undertake projects based on industry problems. Training ends with a virtual summer course, which prepares students for technical interviews with top companies.

Stand-alone nonprofit. Generation USA is the American affiliate of Generation, founded by McKinsey & Company. It prepares, places, and supports individuals in pathways programs for jobs in IT, healthcare, and customer service. The nonprofit partners with employers and community colleges to design and deliver four- to 12-week programs free to students. The program is designed for the unemployed, underemployed, and those facing job displacement, with priority given to Black and Latinx applicants, women, and those without a four-year degree.

The nonprofit's Rising Talent program offers students extra support and one-on-one guidance. Virtual career advising sessions provide students and alumni with one-on-one coaching.