Community Schools and Workforce Development: Building Connections to Support Youth and Adult Work Readiness

Community schools
A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Community schools offer a personalized curriculum that emphasizes real-world learning and community problem-solving. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone – all day, every day, evenings and weekends.

Workforce development
The workforce development system is meant to provide clients, youth and adults, with the skills necessary to enter and be productive in the workforce. Workforce development initiatives offer a range of services, including career exploration, skill-building (i.e. workshops on interviewing, creating a resume, and workplace expectations), adult education, and occupational skills training for industry-specific positions. To provide these services, the workforce development system intersects with a number of other service systems, including schools, human services, and community colleges.

NATURAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
The community school model is a strategy to address the complex challenges experienced by our students, families, and community members. Providing access to work readiness opportunities often involves addressing other challenges, including transportation and childcare, gaps in education and experience, and funding for work attire or preparation exams. The community school is well-poised to address these challenges; the partnerships the school fosters can strengthen its ability to connect students and adults to existing resources and opportunities for hands-on learning and work experiences. Both community school and workforce development organizations recognize that solutions are not found in isolation; assuming a holistic approach with students and/or adults often entails working with and providing services for the entire family and addressing barriers to access that are beyond one program’s scope.

In a time of both significant need and fiscal constraint, fostering connections between community schools and workforce development is an innovative and effective way to leverage existing resources and expertise to provide students and families access to workforce readiness opportunities, as well as to the different supports that may be necessary for them to enter and be successful in the workforce.
Utilize the community school infrastructure to meet students and/or adults where they are.

Providing work readiness opportunities can look very different given a student’s or adult’s skills, challenges, and unique history with school and work. It is important to gain an understanding of a student’s or adult’s experiences and circumstances to ensure services are relevant and meaningful in order to address the potential barriers a student or adult faces in being able to take advantage of workforce development. The community school infrastructure can be used as a source of referrals to partners that address these barriers, thus organizing access to existing resources that can be brought to bear on ensuring students and adults are set up for success.

Start early: provide opportunities for young students to imagine beyond their immediate framework

Programs and partnerships offered through the community school can grant students exposure to other professions and opportunities beyond their immediate framework. This exposure should start early in students’ careers. By beginning this work in elementary and middle school, community schools can maximize students’ exposure to the work and post-secondary worlds.

Preparing students and adults for work involves developing social-emotional competencies

For many students and adults, entering the world of work or post-secondary education can be a challenging and arduous process. Supporting work readiness requires not only developing technical and academic skills but also the social-emotional competencies necessary to face these challenges.

From the field

Audrey Jacobs is the Family and Community Engagement Program Manager at the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago.

In working with adults—often parents whose children attend a community school—Jacobs developed an intake system to gather comprehensive information on education and work background, children and childcare, income, housing, current schedule, and anything else pertinent to assessing the capacity for work or adult education. Based on these discussions, Jacobs is able to work with parents to make an appropriate and relevant plan of action, offering supportive services and resources when necessary, often by connecting families to resources coordinated through their community school.

Guadalupe Martinez is the Director of Workforce Pathways at Instituto Del Progreso Latino

In order to better serve the medical and learning needs of their adult clients, Instituto Del Progreso Latino established a partnership with the Department of Rehabilitation Services. This partnership allows Instituto to make referrals for professional assessment to identify potential medical and learning needs that may serve as barriers to their involvement in the workforce.

From the field

Leslie Stein is the Youth Guidance Social Worker at Roberto Clemente Community Academy

For Stein, preparing her students for work opportunities also involves identifying and developing their social-emotional skills. Stein explains to students that entering and remaining in the workforce requires adapting to a new environment. In order to prepare them, Stein works with students to develop their skills of self-awareness, flexibility, and perseverance.

Provide students opportunities for hands-on career exploration

A significant challenge many youth face is a lack of experience or familiarity with future career options. Community schools can utilize their partnerships, or establish new partnerships, to provide students with opportunities to explore different careers through hands-on work and internship experience.
Practice evaluation and data-driven decision making

Providing quality work readiness opportunities requires being aware of needs at the student/adult and employer level. It is important to establish systems to assess how the skills and needs of both students/adults and employers develop and change over time and adapt programs accordingly. In order to foster productive partnerships, it is also important for community schools and the agencies providing employment skill-development opportunities to be familiar with and flexible to each other’s policies and expectations.

From the field

DeSonta Tillman is the Youth Guidance Community Resource Coordinator at South Shore International College Preparatory High School.

After speaking with her juniors and seniors, Tillman realized that a number of her students had limited experience in the workplace. Given this limited experience, the students had little knowledge of workplace demands and norms and no resumes to offer potential employers. Tillman created partnerships with community-based businesses that offered summer internships, providing students with not only the opportunity to develop their resumes but also hands-on workplace experience and exposure to potential career options.

Tillman also created a feedback loop among employers, job site monitors, and students in order to evaluate and make decisions regarding her program. Based on information from her employer feedback form, job site monitors, and the students themselves, Tillman tailored her preparation workshops to specifically address the skills students needed and wanted to develop.

POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOL PRACTITIONERS

- **Identify the need in your school** – do your high school students have job skills development opportunities? Do they need them? What about the parents and community members? Understand where the largest areas of need are relative to employment and workforce development.

- **Identify the specific kinds of skills that need to be developed** – working off of the needs assessment process, categorize the skill gaps. Do you need to reach out to adult education partners? Partners that offer Bridge programs?

- **Identify the workforce development partners in your community** – who is already doing this work in your community? Are they currently connected to the school, or do opportunities exist to create partnerships?

- **Make the connection** – start the conversations around creating partnerships that meet identified needs and ensure that workforce development services are accessed by the people who can benefit from them. Remember that creating partnerships is a developmental process, but creating partnerships that organize community resources in support of students and families is a critical role of community schools.

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1 Estrada, Dr. Ricardo A. How to Build Bridge Programs That Fit Into A Career Pathway: A Step-By-Step Guide Based on the Carreras en Salud Program in Chicago. Instituto Del Progreso Latino.
RESOURCES FOR PRACTITIONERS, STUDENTS, AND FAMILIES

Programs and organizations

Centers for Working Families | lisc-chicago.org/Our-programs/Centers-for-Working-Families
Operated through twelve community-based organizations with the support of LISC Chicago, the Centers for Working Families offer job services and long-term case management, including financial education and coaching, job placement and improvement, tax preparation services, and public benefits screenings.

Chicago Jobs Council | cjc.net
Chicago Jobs Council works with its members to ensure access to employment and career advancement opportunities for people living in poverty.

Chicago Jobs Council Frontline Focus trainings | scjc.net/frontline-focus/
Chicago Jobs Council offers professional development opportunities for those providing workforce development services.

YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago | ymcachicago.org/programs/community-schools/
Through their Community Schools Program, the YMCA provides high quality, high impact programming for students and families at the community schools with which they partner. A cornerstone of their adult programming in these schools is workforce development training to help adults access the supports and training they need to gain employment.

Youth Guidance | youth-guidance.org/here/?t2t_feature=youth-workforce-development
Youth Guidance creates and implements school-based programs that enable at-risk children to overcome obstacles, focus on their education and, ultimately, to succeed in school and in life. Youth Guidance’s Project Prepare program prepares inner-city youth for high school graduation, post-secondary education, and a future of self-sufficiency.

Online resources for workforce development

Career Coach | womenemployed.org/careercoach
Career Coach provides career and education recommendations based on an online interest/skill self-assessment, a career planning and resume-building tool, information on applying and interviewing for jobs, and a location-based job search.

Illinois WorkNet Center | illinoisworknet.com
Illinois WorkNet offers resources for self-assessment, step-by-step guides to finding work for different categories of workers, occupation overviews, online activities to enhance computer skills, and links to supportive service and job search sites.

O*NET OnLine | onetonline.org
O*NET OnLine offers resources for career exploration, as well as a way to search occupations by skills, interests, and demand.

Youth Futures | youthfuturesmetro.org
Youth Futures provides information (in English and Spanish) for youth seeking employment and skills, including a directory of youth-serving workforce development organizations.

Service directories

The Wire | wire.cjc.net/dynamic/directory
Chicago Jobs Council publishes an on-line directory of employment training and service providers in the Metro Chicago Region.

Purple Binder | purplebinder.com
Purple Binder is a one stop database of social service agencies in the Chicago area designed to help social workers connect their clients to the resources they need.

Academic resources

Khan Academy | khanacademy.org
Khan Academy offers an online library of video tutorials covering K-12 math, science, and humanities.