



# How Do Intermediary Organizations Support Stronger Pathways Systems?

*Executive Summary of a National Landscape Scan*

June 2022

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**“If more students knew about [pathways programming], I think it would be such a game changer . . . to know that just because you may be in a lower income area in high school, that doesn’t mean you can’t be successful.”**

—Lanna Hernandez  
*CareerWise Colorado Apprentice, 18 years old*  
*April 2022*

Source: Education First Interview (2022)

# Education First conducted a landscape scan to build knowledge and inform action across the field to strengthen pathways to good jobs for students

## Why this report?

**As they picture their future, students in the United States aspire for lives in which they can thrive, including a career with a good job.** However, there are disparities in how easy it is for students of color, students who are experiencing poverty and students who attend school in rural communities to access educational opportunities that propel them to a job with the potential for upward economic mobility. Employers, policymakers, K12 system leaders, postsecondary providers and funders stand to benefit from coordinating across sectors to address pain points in their own systems and create a smoother and more equitable experience for all students.

**Pathways intermediaries—organizations that knit K12, postsecondary and workforce systems together**—play a crucial role in ensuring that all students have access to career-connected learning and that sector partners can smoothly coordinate their work. By understanding the capacities that intermediaries bring to the pathways ecosystem and the underlying conditions that enable their work, pathways partners can create a stronger, more equitable system for everyone.

## Who are we?



With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Ascendium, Education First conducted a **nationwide landscape scan of pathways intermediaries**. Grounded in the perspective of intermediary leaders serving racially, socioeconomically and geographically diverse communities, this research provides stakeholders with a deep understanding of the **role and capacities of pathways intermediaries** as well as the **environmental conditions** that enable their success. It provides **actionable implications** for stakeholders to support pathways intermediaries in building an equitable system of pathways for all.

# A set of high-level findings emerged from the research, along with a set of implications for those supporting pathways

## NEED FOR EQUITABLE PATHWAYS AND INTERMEDIARIES

Indicators of postsecondary and career success underscore the need for career-connected pathways to help students access the good jobs they desire. Cross-sector programming and systems coordinated by intermediary organizations can support more students to access pathways to careers with the opportunity for upward economic mobility.



### CORE CAPACITIES

This research identified six core capacities that intermediaries bring to pathways systems:

- *Cross-sector partnerships*
- *Community credibility*
- *Cross-sector data*
- *Program support*
- *Policy and funding*
- *Equity strategies*



### ENABLING CONDITIONS

There are enabling conditions that accelerate progress or present barriers as intermediaries strive to support an equitable pathways system, including the following:

- *Policy context*
- *Partner engagement*
- *Narratives and community history*



### TRENDS ACROSS A SAMPLE OF INTERMEDIARIES

An analysis of a sample of 190 intermediaries operating across the United States elevates the variety of organizations and approaches to pathways intermediary work.



### SCALE

In order to scale their efforts, intermediaries must have a clear understanding about what components of their work lead to impact and work collaboratively with stakeholders to build a strategy for scaling.



### SUSTAINABILITY

Partners and intermediaries should strive to access diversified funding sources and support proximate and cross-sector leaders in order to sustain their work.



### IMPLICATIONS

To realize the benefits of pathways ecosystems, actors across the education and workforce sectors must move beyond traditional siloes to support intermediaries in building equitable systems of pathways.



# Stakeholders across the education and employment continuum express a clear need for equitable pathways

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## NEED FOR EQUITABLE PATHWAYS

- Students aspire to live a good life and believe that a good job is a means to that end.
- Research shows that **racial disparities** exist in **postsecondary attainment** rates and **access to good-paying jobs**.
- Additionally, **geographic disparities** persist in postsecondary attainment rates and studies show that **students experiencing poverty** are less likely than their peers to stay on track.
- To ensure that all students can access pathways that lead to good jobs, **equity** must be a central design consideration.
- When implemented well and with equity as a guiding focus, career-connected **pathways can be beneficial for stakeholders across the ecosystem**: students, K12 schools and systems, postsecondary providers, employers and policymakers all benefit.
- Given these needs, pathways intermediaries help create a pathways system that connects the K12, postsecondary and workforce sectors to create programs and systems that better support students in their journeys.
- The complex task of creating a pathways system requires buy-in from multiple partners and capacity from intermediary organizations to coordinate all partners.

### CROSS A SAMPLE OF INTERMEDIARIES

A sample of 190 intermediaries operating across the education and workforce sectors elevates the variety of approaches to intermediary work.

### SCALE

In order to scale their efforts, intermediary organizations must have a deep understanding about what factors of their work lead to impact and how to collaborate with stakeholders to build a strategy for scaling.

### IMPLICATIONS

The benefits of pathways systems require actors across the education and workforce sectors must move beyond traditional siloes to support students in building equitable pathways.



# Intermediary organizations bring six core capacities to help develop and sustain strong pathways systems

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### CORE CAPACITIES

- These core-capacity functions **may be performed by a single organization or a variety of different organizations** within an ecosystem.
- To succeed, intermediaries must deeply **understand and have credibility with** the communities they work with. Engaging in thoughtful **partnership cultivation and management** helps achieve this.
- High-functioning intermediaries **elevate student voice** to inform programming efforts and seek to incorporate the feedback of those they seek to serve.
- As part of their policy and funding efforts, it is important that successful intermediaries **communicate a clear vision** about pathways efforts.
- Effective intermediaries leverage partnerships and credibility to mobilize **resources, policy change** and **public support** for pathways efforts.
- Intermediaries should have a point of view on the **intended equitable outcomes for student subgroups**, as well as reflect equity priorities in their **internal structure and priorities**.
- Intermediaries operating in rural or politically conservative communities often need to make **strategic choices about when and how to explicitly discuss equity**.



systems of pathways.





# The success and impact of intermediaries depends in part on the strength of enabling conditions

## NEED FOR EQUITABLE PATHWAYS AND INTERMEDIARIES

Indicators of postsecondary and career success underscore the need for career-connected pathways to help students access the good jobs they desire. Cross-sector programming and systems coordinated by intermediary organizations can provide an opportunity for upward economic mobility.



### ENABLING CONDITIONS

- While not all elements required to create strong pathways are place based, **all pathways interventions must eventually land in place**—a school, classroom or employment experience—in order to affect the experience of students as they navigate to a career where they can thrive.
- Our research identified **three enabling conditions** that can accelerate progress or present barriers as intermediaries strive to create an equitable pathways system:
  - + *Policy context*
  - + *Partner engagement*
  - + *Narratives and community history*
- Intermediaries and their partners should strive to **understand the enabling conditions** that are present within the place or places they are striving to affect change.
- Understanding community history, narratives and prior partner relationship is often **especially important** in rural communities and communities that are more racially and ethnically diverse.
- While engagement from partners in all sectors are needed, **buy-in and equity-oriented partnership from employers** are emerging as critical conditions.

### CONDITIONS

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### TRENDS ACROSS A SAMPLE OF INTERMEDIARIES

An analysis of a sample of 190 intermediaries operating across the United States elevates the variety of organizations and approaches to pathways intermediary work.

### IMPLICATIONS

To realize the benefits of an interconnected pathways system, partners across multiple sectors must move beyond traditional siloes to work together seamlessly.



# While intermediaries vary across the country, this research observed trends in their characteristics and locations.

## NEED FOR EQUITABLE PATHWAYS AND INTERMEDIARIES

Indicators of postsecondary and career success underscore the need for career-connected pathways to help students access the good jobs they desire. Cross-sector programming and systems coordinated by intermediary organizations can help drive forward economic mobility.



### TRENDS ACROSS A SAMPLE OF INTERMEDIARIES

- An analysis of a sample of 190 intermediaries operating across the United States demonstrates the **variety of approaches** to pathways intermediary work.
- Through our desk research and conversations with proximate leaders, it became clear that the **structure and work of intermediaries are often influenced by the existing capacities and enabling conditions** in a locality or state.
- Local **context and conditions** play an important role in which organizations steps into the intermediary role, and this can result in wide variation in which organizations serve as an intermediary.
- There may be **co-lead intermediaries** within a community. Multiple organizations across a community can combine their areas of expertise to execute collaboratively on the core functions of intermediaries.
- Future research can build on this sample of intermediaries by **conducting deep stakeholder and landscape analysis within specific geographies** to identify organizations that are filling intermediary roles, what capacities they bring and where support is most needed.

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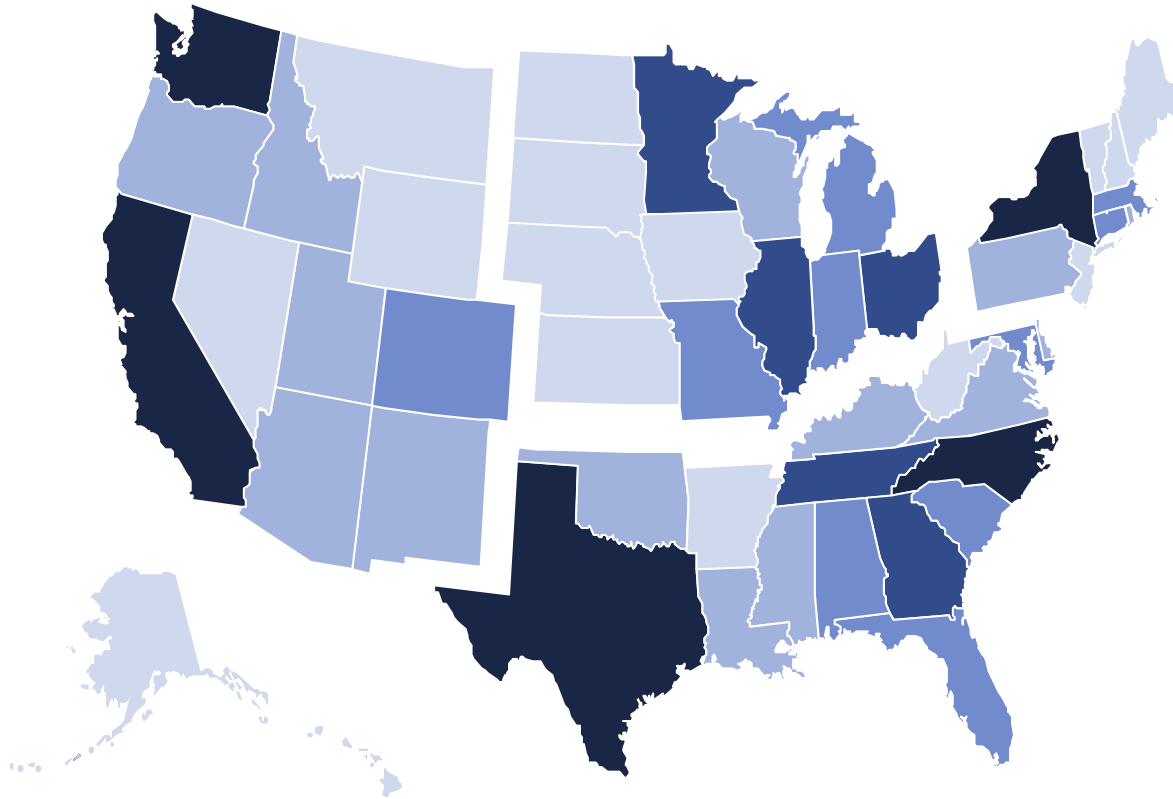
### IMPLICATIONS

To realize the benefits of pathways ecosystems, actors across the education and workforce sectors must move beyond traditional siloes to support intermediaries in building equitable systems of pathways.



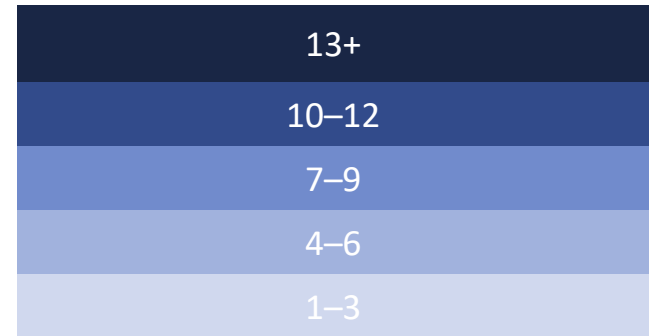


This sample also indicates that while intermediaries are operating in all states and regions, the concentration of intermediaries varies



### Interpreting This Heat Map

*Number of intermediaries in sample*



NOTE: The data in this map are drawn from a sample of 190 intermediaries from a national landscape scan. Information was gathered based on publicly available materials. This sample is intended to illustrate the range and density of intermediaries in this state. It is not an exhaustive list. Organizations that work across multiple states are counted as operating in each state.

Of the intermediaries sampled in this analysis, **Texas (30)**, **California (19)** and **New York (17)** have the largest number of pathways intermediaries operating in their state

# Scaling the impact of intermediaries' work to new geographies requires a strong evidence base and plan for scale

## NEED FOR EQUITABLE PATHWAYS AND INTERMEDIARIES

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### SCALE

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### SCALE

- To address **opportunity gaps** based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and geography, the availability of equitable pathways needs to be scaled.
- In order to scale their efforts, intermediaries must have a **clear understanding** about what components of their work lead to impact and work collaboratively with stakeholders to build a strategy for scaling.
- In the short term, common indicators that help intermediaries and their partners assess their readiness to scale include:
  - + *Robust evidence that the innovation works in diverse settings with diverse students.*
  - + *An independent external evaluation.*
  - + *A clear and compelling scale strategy.*
  - + *A strong coalition of support in the communities where the innovation(s) will be spread.*
  - + *Sustainable sources of funding to support the scaling effort.*



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# Sustainability is a primary concern for many pathways intermediary organizations and their partners

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## SUSTAINABILITY

- Sustainability considerations are especially crucial for intermediaries due to the common challenges they face with securing funding, such as the misconception that cross-sector coordination is low cost, the potential for intermediaries to compete with their partners for funding and limited access to long-term and diverse sources of funding.
- The sustainability of a pathways initiative—and the work of the intermediary—is determined in part by **how willing partners are to invest their resources into the collaboration.**
- Research has found that nonprofit-based pathways intermediaries **tend to rely primarily on philanthropic funding** to sustain their operations.
- Partners and intermediaries should strive to access **diversified funding sources and support proximate and cross-sector leaders** in order to sustain their work.



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## IMPLICATIONS

To realize the benefits of pathways ecosystems, actors across the education and workforce sectors must move beyond traditional siloes to support intermediaries in building equitable systems of pathways.



# Additionally, conversations with rural stakeholders elevated unique needs and challenges as well as assets their communities can leverage to build pathways



## RURAL FINDINGS



### CORE CAPACITIES

- In managing partnerships and building community credibility, the **importance of trust came through particularly strongly in interviews with rural intermediary leaders**. Proximate leadership and a deep understanding of the rural context are factors that can help build trust between an intermediary and the community they seek to serve.
- Leading on equity is a crucial capacity. Rural interviewees noted that phrasing and language around equity particularly matters when working in the **rural context**. Intermediaries that have success moving equitable pathways efforts **often tailor conversations to focus on communities' local equity needs and the vocabulary they use**.

**"Who is furthest from opportunity in your community? We need to begin where your community is at. If we don't do that, we are going to lose people so quickly. [But if we do], then we can actually help create a process to bring stakeholders to the table for a conversation about how to change outcomes for students."**

—Rural Intermediary Leader



### ENABLING CONDITIONS

- Rural communities often have a **strong need and desire** for employers to create good jobs in rural regions.
- Rural communities often have **strong preexisting relationships** among stakeholders and a **history of collaboration** that accelerates pathways efforts.



### SCALE

- Rural pathways ecosystems might be able to **achieve scale** in their communities faster due to a **culture of decision-making and collaboration**.



### SUSTAINABILITY

- Rural intermediary leaders indicate that the **leadership talent pipeline** is a cornerstone of their human capital **sustainability strategy**.

# Given these findings, our research identified eight overarching implications for stakeholders supporting pathways systems

## NEED FOR EQUITABLE PATHWAYS AND INTERMEDIARIES

### IMPLICATIONS

1. To realize the benefits of an interconnected pathways system, **partners must move beyond traditional siloes** to work together seamlessly.
2. Because pathways work is complex and contextual, **investing in intermediaries helps build and sustain** interconnected systems.
3. Partners should expect that **intermediary capacities and structures will vary** to meet the needs of local context and conditions.
4. Intermediaries often play a crucial role in **advocating for coherent policies** that promote cross-sector collaboration.
5. Partners and intermediaries should strive to access **diversified sources of funding and support proximate and cross-sector leaders** in order to sustain their work.
6. Stakeholders must support **and invest in research and evaluation efforts** in order to better understand the role and impact of intermediaries.
7. In order to **scale their efforts**, intermediaries must have a clear understanding on what **components of their work lead to impact** and work collaboratively with stakeholders for scaling.
8. Actors across the pathways ecosystem must work together to **build the enabling conditions** that support intermediaries in building equitable pathways systems.

Interconnected pathways to help students transition from education to employment, initiated by intermediary organizations for upward economic mobility.



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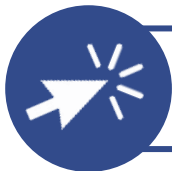
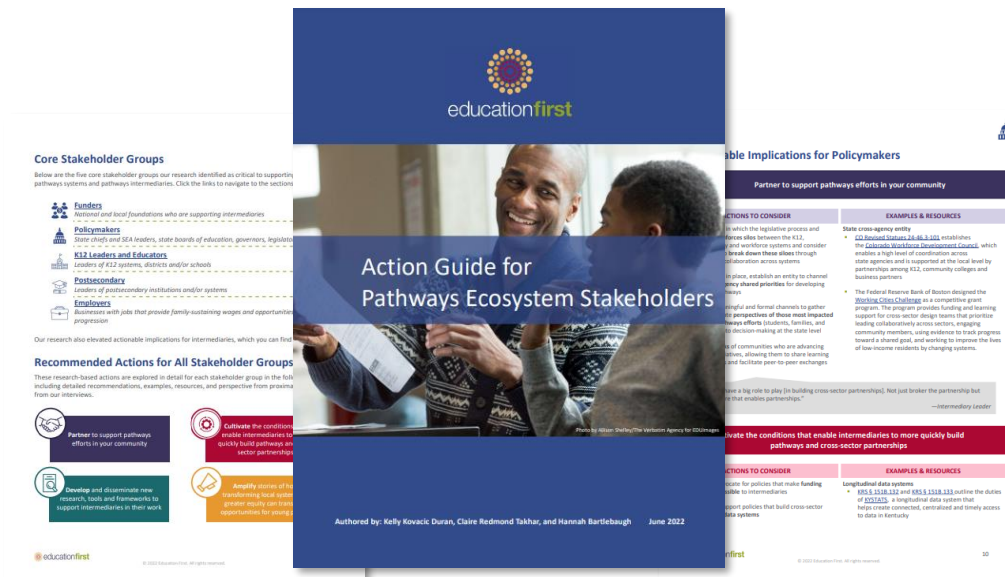
To realize the benefits of pathways ecosystems, actors across the education and workforce sectors must move beyond traditional siloes to support intermediaries in building equitable systems of pathways.



# As stakeholders reflect on how to support intermediaries and build equitable pathways systems, our action guide can help

## Action Guide for Pathways Ecosystem Stakeholders

This action guide **builds on the findings and implications of the landscape scan** and is intended to serve as a tool for stakeholders across pathways systems as they consider **actions to take to support intermediaries and build stronger pathways systems**. The way in which partners show up and engage helps create the enabling conditions that allow intermediaries to serve a crucial coordinating role, aligning partners and creating cohesive momentum.



Click [here](#) for an **action guide** with recommendations specific for each stakeholder group.



# This executive summary is connected to four public goods Education First produced to help stakeholders support intermediaries and strengthen career-connected pathways

## Resources

### Literature Review

A synthesis of the available research on pathways intermediaries, their core capacities, the conditions that enable their work and crucial considerations for supporting them

### Full Report on the National Landscape Scan

Building on the literature review, a robust analysis of the perspective and experience of stakeholders who are striving to create equitable pathways for students, with a particular focus on intermediaries that serve BIPOC students, students who are experiencing poverty and intermediaries working in rural contexts

### Action Guide for Pathways Stakeholders

Detailed recommendations for stakeholders that build on the findings and implications of the full report

### Race, Inclusion, Diversity and Equity (RIDE) Framework

The framework the research team used to ensure that principles of equity and inclusion along lines of racial, geographic and socioeconomic diversity guided this work at every step



[CLICK HERE TO EXPLORE THESE RESOURCES](#)

# Acknowledgments

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“I want to be someone in life that took the right path to being as successful as they could. I dream about my future—if I’m taking the right steps right now, I’ll be doing something I enjoy, and I’ll be giving back to the people that gave to me.”

—Jorge Ramirez

*Student, California State University, Sacramento  
January 2022*

Source: [Equitable Futures—Roadtrip Nation](#)