



Youth Employment & CTE Working Group

Alexandria, Virginia

Year 1 Report 2023-2024

Convened by ACT for Alexandria

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Introduction

This report provides an overview of the Alexandria Youth Employment & CTE Working Group's efforts to date, and an analysis of Alexandria's Youth Employment & Career Technical Education (CTE) ecosystem. Identifying critical challenges, opportunities, and actionable strategies to support the city's young people in building meaningful and sustainable careers and lives in Alexandria. Recognizing the social and economic landscape facing Alexandria's youth, this initiative is guided by a vision that every young person in our city has equitable access to pathways that lead to success, stability, and fulfillment.

At the heart of this effort is a collaboration among diverse stakeholders—including educational institutions, city government, local employers, community-based organizations, funders, parents/ families, and youth themselves—who have come together to form the Alexandria Youth Employment & CTE Working Group. This working group was guided by an “open systems” framework, seeking to break down silos, foster cross-sector partnerships, and build trust within the community to maximize impact.

This report summarizes key insights from stakeholder engagement, focus groups with youth, and in-person labs, shedding light on the current state of career readiness in Alexandria. It outlines examples of goals & accountability metrics, strategies designed to address existing gaps, align stakeholders on a shared vision, and prioritize the needs of Alexandria's diverse youth population.

While this initiative is ambitious, it also requires a collective commitment to overcome persistent barriers, such as limited data-sharing, resource redundancies, and challenges around system alignment. By aligning this work with Alexandria's broader city-wide strategic planning efforts, we aim to establish a resilient and adaptable career readiness ecosystem that grows with the city and continues to meet the evolving needs of our young people.

The primary objectives of the Youth Employment & CTE Working Group are to:

- Enhance youth career readiness opportunities & outcomes through improved educational and employment pathways.
- Foster collaboration across sectors to streamline resources and support systems for all youth.
- Create equitable opportunities for marginalized youth by addressing systemic barriers.
- Engage employers and educators in building a robust youth employment pipeline that aligns with regional workforce needs.

Summary of Working Group Activities

The Alexandria Youth Employment & Career and Technical Education (CTE) Working Group engaged in a series of targeted activities designed to foster collaboration, deepen understanding, and align on strategies to enhance career readiness opportunities & outcomes for youth in Alexandria. Full details may be found in the appendices of this report.

Below is a summary of the key activities:

1. Informal Landscape Analysis and Stakeholder Engagement

Conducted one-on-one conversations with local funders, city council members, school representatives, community leaders, and students to assess the current state of youth employment and CTE programs. Recruited approximately 65-70 working group members, including industry leaders, educators, advocates, and disconnected youth representatives, with 30-35 attending regularly.

2. Kick-Off Lab

Introduced the foundational principles of open systems and targeted universalism to ground the group in a shared approach. Began discussing the potential overarching goals and challenges within Alexandria's youth employment ecosystem and began prioritizing focus areas.

3. Learning Journey

Monthly sessions designed to learn from organizations, such as YouthForce NOLA, to explore innovative models and best practices in youth employment and CTE initiatives. Facilitated subgroup discussions to apply insights to Alexandria's context.

4. In-Person Labs

Hosted interactive sessions to prioritize goals and action steps for data-sharing, employer engagement, and social-emotional learning. Identified gaps in coordination and collaboration among stakeholders, emphasizing the need for relationship building across organizations.

5. Virtual Subgroup Meetings

Held targeted virtual sessions to debrief learning journey findings, explore role-specific challenges, and deepen conversations in areas such as ecosystem mapping, communications, and program streamlining.

6. Youth Focus Groups

Conducted focus groups with high school students, disconnected youth, and apprentices to understand their experiences, stressors, and ideas for career readiness. Themes included the need for clearer CTE pathways, emotional support, and more accessible career exploration opportunities.

7. Survey & Feedback Integration

Distributed surveys to working group members to gauge progress, identify barriers, and gather input on future focus areas. Integrated survey insights into subsequent action planning labs.

8. Action Planning Labs

Facilitated collaborative planning sessions to outline strategic priorities, such as increasing work-based learning opportunities and establishing comprehensive referral systems. Engaged members in trust-building exercises to address existing silos and align on a shared vision.

These activities laid the foundation for a coordinated, data-informed, and inclusive approach to youth employment and career readiness, emphasizing the importance of relationship building and systemic alignment to achieve sustainable impact. The next section will dive deeper into the foundational principles of **Open Systems & Liberatory Design**, as well as **Targeted Universalism**. These principles were introduced to the working group and are recommended to be fully adopted and implemented for this work moving forward.

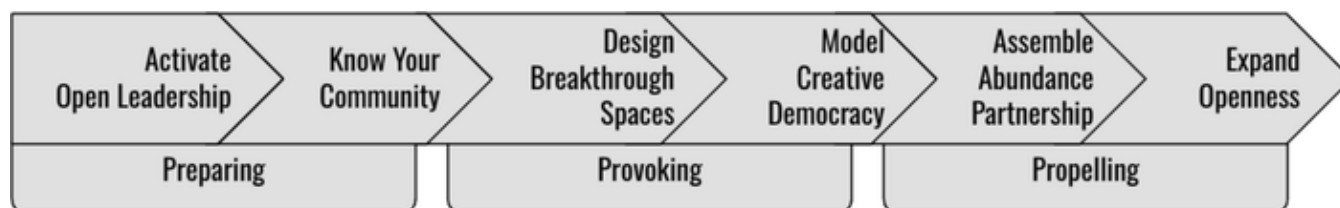


Open Systems & Targeted Universalism Foundational Approach

The Working Group's strategies are guided by **Open Systems Theory** [1] and **Targeted Universalism** [2]. These frameworks foster an inclusive, adaptive, and responsive system that ensures all youth have access to career opportunities while addressing the specific needs of marginalized groups.

Open Systems Theory emphasizes flexibility, collaboration, and responsiveness, which are essential for managing complex, multi-stakeholder initiatives like youth career readiness. This theory is based on six principles, we have begun working through the first three steps and adapted to inform the Working Group's approach.

1. **Activate Open Leadership**- Embrace inclusive, democratic leadership to inspire community-driven change.
2. **Know Your Community**- Build a deep understanding of your community to identify opportunities for collaboration and impact.
3. **Design Breakthrough Spaces**- Create clear, inclusive environments that foster innovation and disrupt outdated practices.
4. **Model Creative Democracy**- Engage in co-creation, repair trust, and use collaborative decision-making to build shared ownership.
5. **Assemble Abundance Partnerships**- Form cross-sector partnerships to achieve greater collective impact.
6. **Expand Openness**- Develop adaptive systems to sustain long-term change and share stories that inspire broader openness.



Targeted Universalism: Equitable Goal Setting with Targeted Strategies

Targeted Universalism is an approach that sets universal goals for all youth while implementing targeted strategies to address the specific needs of marginalized populations. This ensures that:

1. **Universal Goals:** All youth in Alexandria have equitable access to high-quality career readiness resources.
2. **Identification of Barriers:** Through data collection and community feedback, the Working Group identifies barriers faced by specific groups, such as immigrant youth, justice-involved youth, and youth with disabilities.
3. **Tailored Interventions:** Specialized supports are developed to address the needs of these groups, such as bilingual career counseling for English language learners or mentorship programs for youth transitioning out of the juvenile justice system.
4. **Integrated Solutions:** Targeted strategies are implemented within the larger system, fostering inclusivity and cohesion.
5. **Continuous Evaluation:** Regular assessments allow for adjustments to interventions, ensuring responsiveness to changing needs and conditions.

By embracing **Open Systems Theory** and **Targeted Universalism**, the Working Group has the opportunity to ensure that all youth benefit from a comprehensive system that prioritizes equity and access while adapting to the specific challenges faced by marginalized communities. It is recommended that the working group ensure understanding and buy-in from all parties that these will be the guiding principles for the working group moving forward. The next section in this report will outline further recommendations on creating a strong foundation for this work.

Recommendations

To build a sustainable, city-wide approach, the first priority is to secure buy-in for the working group to be the collaborative vehicle to drive this work for Alexandria. This would include from key decision-makers—including the School District, City Council, Relevant City Agency Leads, School Board, Chamber of Commerce, Office of Economic Development and other influential stakeholders. Establishing a shared vision, defining the problem, and aligning on universal goals and accountability metrics related to collaboration & cohesion are crucial steps in setting a strong foundation for this initiative. These recommendations are related to how to create the ecosystem that will allow any new youth/ community facing work to root and thrive.

1. Convene a Meeting to Present Report Findings and Secure Stakeholder Buy-In

Action Steps:

- Host a leadership meeting with City Council, the School Board, and primary stakeholders to present the findings of this report, including the current state, identified gaps, potential goals, and ranked priorities.
- Establish a universal goal and shared vision for youth career readiness based on stakeholder feedback, ensuring alignment and commitment.
- Facilitate discussions to gather initial reactions, identify further considerations, and build a foundation of collaborative ownership for the initiative.

2. Design or Designate an Intermediary

Action Steps:

- Map the current system and align with city-wide strategic planning efforts (ACPS 2030 Plan, DCHS Children & Youth Community Plan, Alexandria Health Department Community Assessment, and Partnership for Healthy Alexandria Community Health Improvement Plan).
- Document existing programs, resources, and challenges in the youth employment ecosystem.
- Identify and address redundancies and gaps, and create a visual system map to guide strategic improvements.
- Create or designate an intermediary that integrates deeper youth career readiness goals into Alexandria's broader strategic objectives, reinforcing city-wide prioritization. (see YouthForce Nola as an example)

3. Develop Data-Driven Decision-Making and Impact Measurement Systems

Action Steps:

- Set up a **data-sharing framework** across agencies & schools, and relevant partners.
- Define success metrics and track progress by demographic to ensure equitable impact.
- Use insights to inform decision-making, make adjustments as needed, and maintain transparency.

4. Foster Trust, Transparency, and Open Communication

Action Steps:

- Maintain regular forums for open dialogue to share challenges, successes, and adjustments.
- Use transparent data-sharing and decision-making to reinforce a sense of shared purpose.

Despite progress, silos persist across agencies and organizations involved in Alexandria's youth employment and career technical education (CTE) ecosystem. Addressing these challenges requires intentional, strategic trust-building initiatives within and across participating organizations and agencies. Strengthening trust and collaboration among stakeholders will enhance coordination, streamline services, and maximize the impact of collective efforts to support youth in Alexandria.

In collaborative efforts like the Youth Employment & CTE Working Group, fractures in communication, alignment, or trust can arise. These moments—though challenging—provide valuable opportunities for growth and recalibration. Rather than viewing these instances as setbacks, they can be seen as essential parts of the process, highlighting areas that need attention to foster a more cohesive and resilient group dynamic.

Once the recommendations above are implemented, the next section outlines potential goals and priorities that were developed from the in-person labs and virtual subgroup meetings. The details on those meetings can be found in the appendices.



Potential Goals & Priorities

Ranked Priorities

Based on discussions and feedback, the following priorities have been ranked to guide programmatic focus and resource allocation

1. Program Mapping & Streamlining: Create a comprehensive map of existing programs and streamline overlapping services to enhance efficiency and accessibility.

2. Data Structure & Strategy: Develop a unified data structure to enable effective tracking, reporting, and analysis of youth outcomes and program impact.

3. Goal Setting & Regional Alignment: Establish clear, measurable goals aligned with regional workforce needs and educational objectives, enhancing alignment across stakeholders.

4. Communications & Marketing: Implement a coordinated communications strategy to raise awareness of available opportunities and reduce stigma around non-college pathways.

5. Ecosystem & Referral Systems: Build a cohesive referral system to connect youth seamlessly with relevant services, addressing gaps in existing support networks.

6. Employer Engagement & Pipeline Building: Strengthen partnerships with employers to create robust pipelines for youth employment and work-based learning opportunities.

7. Work-Based Learning: Expand work-based learning programs, such as internships and apprenticeships, to provide hands-on experience in diverse career paths.

8. Social-Emotional Learning & Support: Prioritize SEL across programs to address mental health needs, foster resilience, and enhance self-advocacy skills in youth.

9. Parent/Family/Mentor Engagement: Increase engagement with parents, families, and mentors to support youth in career exploration and decision-making processes

The following draft goals have been identified as having the potential to address these challenges and improve youth outcomes:

Access, Engagement & Exploration

- **Goal:** By December 31, 2028, increase youth participation in career exploration activities by a specific percentage, including diverse groups such as women, Hispanic youth, Black youth, immigrant youth, youth with differing abilities, and justice-involved youth.
- **Objective:** Implement targeted outreach and partner with community-based organizations to enhance participation in initiatives like career fairs, job shadowing, and paid work-based learning.

Pathways & Outcomes

- **Goal:** By December 31, 2028, increase the percentage of youth completing in-demand credentials linked to high-growth industries and wages above the regional median.
- **Objective:** Provide accessible pathways to credentials and build confidence among youth in their career preparedness through regular assessments.

Social-Emotional Learning & Support

- **Goal:** Integrate social-emotional learning into program offerings to reduce stress and support self-esteem, resilience, and goal-setting skills among youth.
- **Objective:** Develop initiatives addressing SEL within CTE and career readiness programs to support a holistic approach to youth development.



Conclusion

This report serves as both a reflection on our collective efforts and a roadmap for Alexandria's journey toward creating a transformative ecosystem for youth employment and career readiness. It captures the collaborative spirit of the working group, the insights from diverse stakeholders, and the feedback from youth and community members who are at the heart of this work.

The findings and recommendations outlined here illuminate critical needs, such as building trust within and across organizations, aligning stakeholders around a universal goal, and addressing systemic barriers with openness and intentionality. By adopting Open Systems principles, the working group has the opportunity to lead with transparency, collaboration, and adaptability, ensuring that the solutions developed are not only impactful but also sustainable.

This work is an evolving process, and its success depends on continued engagement, alignment, and commitment from all stakeholders. By prioritizing co-creation, fostering inclusive partnerships, and leveraging data-driven strategies, Alexandria can create a model that empowers its youth and sets a standard for other communities to follow.

The path ahead is clear: convene, align, and act with purpose. With the collective energy and shared vision of all involved, Alexandria can achieve a future where every young person is prepared, supported, and inspired to realize their full potential. Let this report serve as a catalyst for that vision—a reminder that meaningful change is possible when we work together toward a common goal.

Appendices



Appendix A

Listening Sessions with Potential Co- Creators

To gain a deeper understanding of the current state of youth employment and career readiness in Alexandria, listening sessions were held with over 50 key potential co-creators from community members, youth, agency employees/ officials, teachers, school based staff, employers and higher education administrators before creating the working group. These conversations revealed several critical themes:

- **Data Transparency & Accessibility** - There is a need for accessible, disaggregated, and shared data to properly assess goals, barriers, needs, and potential areas of success that could be scaled.
- **Enhancing Cohesive Career Readiness Strategy & Support** - Youth focus groups expressed the need for more social-emotional support, as well as skills and experience necessary to identify and access available jobs, particularly in growing fields like healthcare and technology.
- **Limited Work-Based Learning** - Strengthening employer partnerships is critical to expand experiential learning pathways, including paid internships, apprenticeships, and other work-based learning opportunities.



Building a Foundation of Trust in Alexandria's Youth Employment Ecosystem

Within the Youth Employment & CTE Working Group, some of the existing challenges stem from silos, varied organizational objectives, and a need for trust-building among stakeholders. Addressing these needs thoughtfully can enhance internal cohesion and foster a healthier ecosystem. By integrating Open Systems principles—especially Creative Democracy, Abundance Partnerships, and Openness—the group can create a collaborative environment that prioritizes trust, transparency, and adaptability.

Through a conscious focus on building trust and embracing open communication, the working group can transform challenges into opportunities for mutual learning and growth. This foundation will support the group in achieving its goals for youth career readiness in Alexandria, creating a resilient, aligned ecosystem that benefits the youth and community as a whole.

The remainder of the report will outline the process of assembling the working group, an overview of the learning journey and all activities that contribute to the recommendations above.

Appendix B

Working Group Recruitment

The working group was initially formed by an existing coalition of funders, council members, and community representatives who identified the need for a collaborative approach to enhance youth career readiness and community workforce development. This founding group serves as the Working Group Advisors and provides ongoing guidance and strategic insights. To expand the reach and diversity of perspectives in the working group, additional members were recruited as advisors to include industry leaders, school representatives, and other essential community stakeholders.

Our recruitment strategy led to a membership of approximately 50-55 individuals, with about 30-35 members attending sessions regularly and additional members participating as their schedules allowed. The recruitment process focused on the following to ensure representation across sectors, demographics, and interests:

Essential Members:

- Schools and educational institutions
- City government representatives and elected officials
- Employers and industry leaders
- Youth advocates and youth representatives
- Advocacy organization representatives

These members play a crucial role in shaping the strategic direction of the working group and implementing initiatives.

Potential Members:

- Parents and families who may not typically engage in such initiatives
- Disconnected or marginalized youth who can offer unique perspectives on their needs and barriers

Recognizing the importance of inclusivity, efforts were made to invite individuals whose participation is often uncommon but essential to the group's objectives. These potential members were reached through targeted outreach programs, such as those facilitated by the Alexandria Housing Authority.

Through this recruitment process, the working group attempted to establish a broad-based coalition of stakeholders dedicated to advancing career readiness and equitable opportunities for Alexandria's youth.

Working Group Members & Participants

This list includes all members and participants who attended any of the working group sessions.

Kathryn Adabonyan – Go Pursue
Gaston Araoz – Dominion Energy
Katrina Ashmore – City of Alexandria, Workforce Development Center
Sarah Bagley – Alexandria City Council
Josh Beebe – Ironworkers Local Union 5
Steven Boney – WMATA
Patrick Brennan – Communities in Schools
Noraine Buttar – City of Alexandria, Department of Community & Human Services
Lorraine Carrasco – Citi
Maria Ciarrocchi – Alexandria Chamber of Commerce
Lisa Cohen – Open Horizon
Kate Comfort – Comfort Family Foundation
Christina Damhuis – City of Alexandria Workforce Development Center
Derry Deringer – Cornerstone Craftsman
Azhia Dorsey – Alexandria Seaport Foundation
Rob Dugger
Jim Epstein – Frank & Betty Wright Foundation
Jennifer Gale – Community Philanthropist
Alyia Gaskins – Mayor of Alexandria
Lesa Gilbert – City of Alexandria, Department of Community & Human Services
Pamela Gilchrist – Virginia Tech
Jovita Gill – Alexandria City Public Schools
Laetitia Gnago – Northern Virginia Community College
Roberto Gomez – Cornerstone Craftsman
Randy Gore – The Campagna Center
Melissa Guerrero Gelinas – Liberty's Promise
Melissa Harrington- Community member

Krishna Leyva – Alexandria City Public Schools, Family & Community Engagement Center
Dr. Tricia Jacobs – Alexandria City Public Schools
Zohreh Khoshnamak – Chrysalis Development Corporation
Erick King – Capital Youth Empowerment Program
Allen Lomax – Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria
Alberto Marino – WMATA
Garrett McGuire – AT&T
Clark Mercer – Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments
Michelle Millben – Code Rising
Makachi Ngobili
Heather Peeler – ACT for Alexandria
Kristina Peterson – Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area
Babak Pirouz – Chrysalis Development Corporation
John Porter
David Remick – Arlington/Alexandria Regional Workforce Council
Ryan Reyna – Education Strategy Group and Alexandria School Board
Melissa Riddy – Inova Health System
Michelle Rief – Alexandria School Board
Deb Roepke – Alexandria Seaport Foundation
Carmen Sanders – Alexandria City Public Schools
Ashley Tatum
Taneika Taylor Tukan – Alexandria City Public Schools
Nigel Walker – Inova Health System
Rachel Wooden – Kaiser Permanente
Brandi Yee – ACT for Alexandria

Appendix C

Kick-Off Lab Summary

The Kick-Off Lab in February 2024 served as a foundational session for Alexandria's Youth Employment & CTE Working Group, setting the stage for collaboration, shared understanding, and long-term strategy development. Held with representatives across sectors—including educators, local government, nonprofit organizations, employers, and community stakeholders—this initial lab aimed to foster a collective commitment to building a more cohesive, effective system for youth career readiness and technical education in Alexandria and identifying potential members of the working group.

Objectives of the Kick-Off Lab

The primary goals of the Kick-Off Lab included:

- **Building a Shared Vision:** Establishing a unified vision for youth employment and CTE in Alexandria, centered on creating equitable pathways to success for all youth, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds.
- **Introducing Key Frameworks:** Presenting the foundational approaches of Open Systems and Targeted Universalism, encouraging participants to rethink traditional approaches to collaboration and youth development.
- **Identifying Immediate Challenges and Opportunities:** Engaging stakeholders in discussions to identify key barriers and gaps within Alexandria's current youth employment ecosystem and to highlight opportunities for collaboration.
- **Establishing Guiding Principles:** Introducing the principles of open systems as a guiding framework for ongoing work, emphasizing the importance of collaboration, flexibility, and community-driven leadership.
- **Setting the Stage for Subgroup Work:** Laying the groundwork for specialized subgroups that would focus on specific areas such as data strategy, work-based learning, and employer engagement, allowing for a more targeted approach to addressing complex challenges.

Key Activities and Insights

The Kick-Off Lab included a series of structured activities, collaborative exercises, and open discussions designed to bring stakeholders together, surface diverse perspectives, and begin building a foundation for ongoing work. Key activities included:

1. **Introduction to Open Systems & Targeted Universalism:** The facilitators provided a comprehensive overview of the Open Systems model, emphasizing its six principles (Activate Open Leadership, Know Your Community, Design Breakthrough Spaces, Model Creative Democracy, Assemble Abundance Partnerships, and Expand Openness). This discussion underscored the importance of breaking down silos, building trust, and co-creating solutions that are responsive to local needs.
2. **Targeted Universalism** was introduced as a guiding framework to balance universal goals (ensuring that all youth have access to career readiness resources) with targeted strategies that address the unique challenges faced by different demographic groups within Alexandria.
3. **Identifying Barriers and Opportunities:** Participants were divided into small groups to discuss common barriers to effective youth employment and CTE programming, such as limited access to data, inconsistent funding, lack of communication between schools and employers, and insufficient engagement with marginalized youth.
4. **Outcome:** Groups reported back with a list of barriers as well as potential solutions. This collective brainstorming laid the groundwork for establishing priority areas, including data strategy, work-based learning opportunities, and employer engagement.
5. **Introduction to Working Group Subgroups:** Recognizing the range of focus areas and expertise needed, the facilitators introduced the idea of subgroups that would each focus on a particular element of the youth employment ecosystem. Initial subgroup ideas included:
6. **Data Structure & Strategy:** Focused on developing a comprehensive data-sharing and tracking system.
7. **Work-Based Learning:** Dedicated to creating meaningful work-based learning experiences, such as internships, apprenticeships, and job shadowing.
8. **Employer Engagement & Pipeline Building:** Tasked with strengthening partnerships with local employers and expanding career pathways.
9. **Social-Emotional Learning & Support:** Committed to integrating SEL into career readiness programs, recognizing its importance in building resilience and life skills.

Key Takeaways and Lessons Learned

1. **Strong Desire for Collaboration and Coordination:** Stakeholders expressed a clear interest in working collaboratively across organizations, acknowledging that a unified approach would yield better outcomes for youth in Alexandria. However, it was evident that past initiatives had been hindered by fragmentation, with participants noting the importance of breaking down silos and building a system that fosters continuous collaboration.
2. **Need for Clear, Measurable Goals:** Participants emphasized the importance of establishing clear goals and measurable outcomes from the beginning. There was a collective recognition that, without defined objectives and metrics, it would be challenging to track progress or secure sustainable funding for initiatives. This laid the groundwork for future discussions on goal-setting and regional alignment.
3. **Commitment to Equity and Inclusion:** The Kick-Off Lab highlighted the need for intentional strategies to support marginalized and underserved youth populations. Stakeholders recognized that, while the goal is to support all youth in Alexandria, there must be a targeted focus on removing barriers for groups who face unique challenges (e.g., immigrant youth, justice-involved youth, youth with differing abilities).
4. **Importance of Flexible, Adaptive Systems:** The introduction of the Open Systems framework resonated with participants, particularly the emphasis on adaptability and responsiveness to community needs. Many expressed appreciation for the approach, noting that it aligned with their desire to build a system that can evolve over time in response to feedback and changing circumstances.

Immediate Focus Areas for Action

Through discussions, several immediate areas of focus emerged as critical for initial action, including:

- Developing a **data-sharing infrastructure** to facilitate communication and tracking across agencies.
- Expanding **work-based learning opportunities** for youth, especially in high-growth industries.
- Establishing a **city-wide communications strategy** to increase awareness of career readiness resources among youth, families, and community organizations.
- Integrating **social-emotional learning** into youth career development programming, with an emphasis on building resilience and self-efficacy.

Appendix D

Working Group Survey

The survey results, from 17 respondents, provide a diverse range of feedback on the working group's impact, structure, and areas for improvement. Here's a summary of the main insights:

Key Benefits and Impact of Working Group

Networking and Collaboration:

- Respondents highlighted the value of networking, meeting other committed individuals, and gaining insights into others' work in the community.
- New connections have been formed with organizations like Inova, WMATA, and local nonprofits, contributing to potential partnerships and collaborations.

Knowledge and Resources:

- Members found the data presentations, like the YouthForce NOLA and Nova CC data, highly informative.
- Exposure to resources and databases has helped some members enhance their day-to-day work.
- Learning journeys have facilitated a better understanding of the local landscape for Youth Employment and CTE.

Strategic Thinking and Vision:

- Several participants noted an increased awareness of the need for a coordinated system to reach more youth, emphasizing the importance of setting a clear, shared mission and goals.
- Participants expressed a desire to break down silos and work more holistically, with some even rethinking their organization's strategic plans based on insights gained.

Areas for Improvement

Need for Clear Mission and Goals:

- Some respondents feel the group lacks a clear direction, with a few calling for a more focused, universal goal to guide discussions and initiatives.
- Suggestions include developing shared goals that each subgroup could work on collaboratively.

Structure and Format of Sessions:

- There's a preference for more in-person meetings to enable deeper connections and more productive discussions.
- Many members find the virtual format limiting for collaborative work, with suggestions for longer, in-person sessions combined with targeted virtual breakout groups.
- The format could also benefit from dedicated workshops focused on action planning and small pilot initiatives to drive progress.

Suggested Topics for Future Sessions:

- Members would like to see overviews from working group members on current initiatives, system operations (like those from ACHS), and a focus on shared goals.
- Additional desired topics include funding sources, CTE integration in overall city and school planning, and mentorship programs for high school and college freshmen.

Enhanced Communication and Background Information:

- Respondents suggested providing more context on speakers and an overview of session expectations to help members engage more fully in the discussions.

Working Group Recommendations Based on Feedback

- **Define a Universal Goal:** Create a focused mission statement and goals that all members can rally behind and work towards.
- **Increase In-Person Engagement:** Organize regular in-person sessions for strategy discussions, along with smaller, task-focused virtual meetings to maintain momentum.
- **Focus on Action-Oriented Workshops:** Implement work sessions or pilot projects to experiment with new strategies and gain actionable insights.
- **Improve Communication and Context:** Provide background information on speakers and session objectives to ensure all members are aligned and prepared.



Appendix E

Action Labs & Virtual Subgroup Meetings

In-Person Action Labs Summary

The 4 in-person labs were designed as interactive, collaborative sessions in direct response to feedback from the working group survey. Many survey respondents highlighted the need for in-person engagement, deeper conversations, and a clearer sense of shared goals. While virtual sessions provided valuable information, the feedback indicated that they limited opportunities for effective networking, relationship-building, and open dialogue. The in-person labs were thus crafted to address these specific needs, fostering more engaging and productive discussions to strengthen the foundation of the working group.

The labs centered on these core objectives based on survey feedback:

- **Goal Setting and Prioritization:** Responding to calls for a unified vision and clearer objectives, the labs focused on beginning the process of collaborative goal-setting. Participants worked together to start defining specific, measurable goals in areas like data sharing, ecosystem alignment, and career exploration programs, establishing a shared sense of purpose and direction for the group.
- **Trust-Building and Repairing Relationships:** A significant outcome of these labs was the realization of a need for intentional trust-building within the working group and across Alexandria's broader ecosystem. Through facilitated discussions, members acknowledged persistent silos and past misalignments that have affected collaboration.

Virtual Subgroup Meetings Summary

In between each Learning Journey session, the Youth Employment & CTE Working Group convened virtual subgroup meetings to debrief and explore the topics further. These sessions provided an opportunity for participants to engage in role-alike groups, such as educators, employers, youth advocates, and community-based organizations.

12. Investment Priorities in Career Readiness:

- What are the current funding priorities for supporting career readiness & youth employment initiatives in Alexandria?

Underserved populations have been shortchanged on access to resources leaving youth proportionally behind. Our workforce is going to suffer if we do not prioritize

Funding of ACT-WFD group's initiatives

CFF has a funding priority to connect youth with opportunities for high wage/good benefit careers specifically for those who may not pursue a 4 year post-secondary track.

To create a formalized and inclusive pipeline to catch our students from elementary in and through high school, making sure that there is equitable access to opportunities

Would like to see employers pool that creates a sustainable channel from our school system and WFD program as well as providing teachers and certifications!

Understanding Dr. Jacob's immediate needs to successfully move in to new space and offer classes up to capacity

- What specific outcomes or impacts do funders seek to achieve through their investments in youth development and career preparation programs?

Funding for this work should be catalytic - get activities off the ground. Sustainability is getting local and state dollars (and private sector resources) to keep it going

We know that social capital (who you know) is just as important as what you know for lifelong success. Need to help students map and build networks

Funders working together with a unified multi-year funding commitment is critical. Will signal to business community and State value of additional funding.

Should think of this as a continuum for all youth, just some start at different levels but ALL should get where their potential leads them.

Suggest we think about this as supporting ALL youth, rather than as a separate thing for some youth

- How do funders assess the effectiveness and sustainability of the programs they support, and what metrics or indicators do they use to measure success?

As a funder data is important for us to make significant investments however, we always want to balance this against the administrative burden of data collection and analysis

Funders seek data-informed outcomes. YouthForce NOLA gave a lesson learned as starting measurement efforts early, from the beginning, I'm curious re: assessment plans.

YouthForce NOLA had clear metrics around #s of students reached for different inputs (e.g. externships, skill-building). How can we make use of / learn from them?

Re: Outcomes/Impact: I think it is important to defer to the experts to determine what metrics best tell the story of their programs effectiveness rather than...

... (continued from previous sticky) Re: outcomes/impact: rather than dictating metrics that require data collection that doesn't truly tell the story of mission impact

Outcomes: # of students in pathways, # of work-based learning opportunities, # of youth completing high-quality pathways, # of youth enrolling in postsec

Funders should be able to see the pipeline of academic/social/emotional confidence building leading to directed CTE and training connected trades or industries

There are several resources used by funders to track effectiveness and sustainability. This initiative should develop this criteria as part of the outcomes

As a funder, I need to see data points on number of kids entering and exiting program and follow them 2-3 years post-graduation to see efficacy of the program applied

Current Priorities and Needs in Alexandria's Career Readiness and Youth Employment Ecosystem- The following pages outline notes from each subgroup. Above is an example of a document produced during a virtual brainstorming session. This report has compiled those documents and summarized them below.

Employer Priorities and Needs

- **Reducing Barriers to Entry:** Employers are striving to lower job posting qualifications and requirements to make opportunities more accessible to high school students.
- **Career Exploration:** Increased opportunities for career exploration across all fields are needed, along with better awareness of high-wage pathways and existing programs.
- **Local Hiring:** Employers aim to increase local hiring of Alexandria residents, particularly for high-growth industries.
- **Pipeline Development:** With a retiring workforce and new industries (e.g., hospitals and hubs) emerging, employers need a strategic plan to develop talent pipelines.
- **Community Outreach:** There is a need for more education on how to apply for open jobs, raising awareness about available opportunities, and connecting with more businesses for outreach.
- **Workplace Expectations:** Employers are navigating trends like remote, hybrid, and in-office work, and youth perspectives on early career experiences. Preparing youth for these dynamics is essential.
- **Post-COVID Employment Trends:** Employers are adapting to changes in workforce needs and expectations following the pandemic.

Employer-Valued Skills and Competencies

- **Soft Skills:** Professional communication, initiative, follow-through, and interpersonal skills.
- **Tech and Media Literacy:** Social media and technology proficiency.

Challenges with Employer Engagement and School Partnerships

- **Awareness and Marketing:** Opportunities and programs are under-marketed, limiting their reach and impact.
- **Engagement Plan:** Employers need clear plans for engaging with schools and understanding their needs.
- **Youth Training:** Employers require additional training on how to work effectively with youth and integrate them into internal pipelines.

Existing Career Readiness and Youth Employment Initiatives

- **Summer Youth Employment Program:** Supports around 261 students in 2024, fluctuating based on funding.
- **CTE Work-Based Learning:** High schools provide work-based learning opportunities through CTE pathways, while middle schools include career exploration activities.
- **Job Fairs:** Recently hosted 165 youth attendees.
- **Out-of-School Youth Program:** Offers 18–24-year-olds a six-week employment program and training.
- **Juvenile Detention Center Program:** Pilots a six-week workforce development curriculum for justice-involved youth.
- **International Academy Internship Elective:** Prepares students for internships through career readiness instruction and hands-on opportunities.

Youth Navigation of Career Readiness Programs

- **Accessing Programs:** Youth often learn about programs through:
 - Word of mouth.
 - Enrollment in CTE pathways.
 - Recruitment efforts by schools and city agencies.
- **Challenges:** Pathways and programs are disconnected and overwhelming for families to navigate, requiring:
 - A comprehensive map of programs and services.
 - Streamlined entry points.

Challenges Faced by Youth

- **Barriers:** Language, transportation, work authorization, and restrictive entry requirements (e.g., starting pathways only in September) hinder youth access.
- **Capacity Issues:** Families need more education about available resources.
- **Soft Skills:** Many youth lack training in essential workplace skills like interviewing and professionalism.

Service Provider Challenges

- **Coordination Gaps:** Better alignment is needed between schools, nonprofits, and agencies.
- **Equity in Referrals:** There is a need for a fair and streamlined referral process for connecting students with opportunities.
- **Hub Model:** A centralized hub, similar to NOLA's model, could enhance collaboration without relying solely on ACPS.

Parent and Family Perspectives

- **Undocumented Youth:** Few opportunities exist for undocumented students.
- **Outreach Challenges:** Language barriers often prevent parents from receiving information about opportunities.
- **Program Accessibility:** Many programs lack flexibility to accommodate students' part-time jobs or family responsibilities.
- **Knowledge Gaps:** Families may not understand viable workforce pathways due to limited networks and exposure.

Funder Priorities

- **Inclusive Pipelines:** Funders emphasize the need for equitable access to opportunities from elementary school through high school.
- **Underserved Populations:** Addressing disparities is crucial to prevent youth from falling behind and negatively impacting the workforce.
- **Collaborative Funding:** Unified, multi-year commitments signal to businesses and the state the importance of funding these initiatives.
- **Data and Metrics:** Funders need robust data to track student outcomes and program effectiveness.
- **Regional Collaboration:** Since job opportunities extend beyond Alexandria, funders advocate for cross-jurisdictional coordination.

Data Systems and Knowledge Gaps

This summary outlines the key needs, challenges, and opportunities for improving career readiness and youth employment in Alexandria, offering a foundation for targeted and collaborative action.

- **Existing Systems:** There is limited clarity about the availability and quality of existing data.
- **Gaps:** A city-wide longitudinal data system is needed to track youth career readiness and outcomes over time.
- **Research Needs:** More information is required to address access and achievement gaps, measure program efficacy, and understand outcomes.

Appendix F

Youth Focus Group Summary

Alexandria Youth Council Focus Group

Participants' Backgrounds:

11 (10 females and 1 male) In-school youth leaders in Alexandria City Schools

3 participated directly in CTE pathways and classes

The group was racially & ethnically diverse including Latino, African American, Asian, and immigrant populations.

Meeting Purpose: To gather insights from Alexandria youth on their career readiness experiences, challenges, and suggestions for improvement



Key Takeaways:

- **Experiential Learning:** Students expressed a strong desire for more experiential learning opportunities, such as job shadowing and work-based learning.
- **CTE Pathways:** There is a need for more clarity on Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways with clear entry points, scheduling, and a deeper understanding of offerings.
- **Social-Emotional Support:** Students emphasized the need for more support around the social-emotional aspects of career readiness.
- **Future-Related Stress:** Many students feel significant stress when thinking about their futures, particularly regarding career, college, and finances.

Topics Discussed:

Students learned about careers through various avenues, such as CTE pathways, family influence, or were still uncertain about their paths.

CTE Pathways

1. Students shared mixed experiences with CTE pathways. While some participated, others wanted to but couldn't fit it into their schedules.
2. Barriers included a limited range of options outside of STEM and business, as well as disruptions in pathways caused by COVID-19.

Stress Factors

1. Many students feel stressed by the prospect of making major life decisions around careers and college.
2. There is pressure to succeed in high school to gain admission to competitive colleges.
3. Concerns about student debt and the ability to pay off college loans add to the stress.

Suggestions from Students

1. Provide tailored career exploration resources for International Academy students and disconnected youth.
2. Highlight post-secondary options beyond college, addressing stigma around non-college pathways and "blue-collar" careers.

Seaport Foundation Apprentice Focus Group

Participants' Backgrounds:

5 Males of color ages 18-23, out of school

Participants came to the Seaport Foundation's programs through various referrals, such as family members or social services.

Many attempted college but found it was not the right fit, often due to challenges with new independence, time management, and the lack of knowledge on a clear career pathway.



Key Takeaways:

- **Trade Careers:** Participants highlighted that trades can be a viable alternative to college, saving both time and money.
- **School System Changes:** They suggested that schools could benefit from focusing more on creativity, experiential learning, and differentiated instruction.
- **Emotional Support Needs:** Many participants struggled with self-esteem, particularly young men, and expressed the need for support in handling emotions and managing self-expectations.
- **Importance of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):** Participants recommended incorporating SEL into schools, teaching skills such as goal setting, self-advocacy, and mindfulness.

Topics Discussed:

- There was a consensus that society often overemphasizes college, while trades offer valuable and rewarding career paths.
- Participants appreciated that trades allowed them to avoid the high costs associated with college while still providing a pathway to financial stability.
- Participants felt that schools could better support diverse learners by embracing experiential learning, connecting students to real-world opportunities, and including wraparound services.
- They also noted that creativity and hands-on learning were underemphasized.
- Many young men in the focus group mentioned that they felt societal pressure to avoid asking for help and feared showing vulnerability.
- Participants suggested that schools and programs could benefit from creating safe spaces for young men to express themselves and seek guidance.

Additional Supports and Opportunities

- Participants mentioned the need for job fairs, driving classes (important for many trade jobs), and community-building activities.
- Suggestions also included having youth ambassadors and peer outreach programs to increase awareness of expanded pathways and connect with disengaged youth.

These focus groups provided valuable insights into the barriers and opportunities in the youth career readiness space. The feedback underscored the importance of expanded pathways to the future, SEL, and community support in helping Alexandria's youth feel more prepared and supported in their life journeys.

Appendix G

Learning Journey Overview

Each session in the learning journey was designed to introduce experts who share best practices and promising models related to career readiness initiatives nationwide.

Learning Journey Session 1: YouthForce NOLA“Building Impactful Strategic Partnerships Across Sectors”

The initial learning journey session, titled “Building Impactful Strategic Partnerships Across Sectors,” featured a presentation from YouthForce NOLA, an organization based in New Orleans.

Overview of YouthForce NOLA: YouthForce NOLA prepares New Orleans public school students for high-wage, high-demand career pathways, facilitating systems change to support sustained progress. YouthForce NOLA functions as an intermediary between education, business, and civic entities to bridge school and work. By partnering with schools, employers, training providers, and community organizations, YouthForce NOLA increases economic opportunities for students in New Orleans.

Session Objectives:

- Understand the YouthForce NOLA model for building cross-sector partnerships.
- Identify strategies for replicating and adapting the model to Alexandria.
- Explore necessary partnerships and stakeholders for developing a career readiness hub.
- Discuss strategies for aligning goals and objectives across sectors for effective collaboration.

Learning Journey Session 2: DC Public Schools' College & Career Readiness team insights, leveraging Summer Youth Employment as a catalyst for ecosystem building

This session provided insights into expanding and optimizing youth employment and career readiness through structured pathways, particularly focusing on summer youth employment programs (SYEP) as internship opportunities and connecting the city agency program to the school career pathways/ academies. Representatives from DCPS Central Office discussed strategies, program models, and funding opportunities to support high school students' career development in partnership with the DC Department of Employment Services.

Session Details:

- **Recording Link:** [View Recording - 86 minutes](#)

Key Topics Covered:

- 01 Youth Engagement and Program Recruitment - Emphasis on recruiting students into structured career pathways from 9th grade onward to prepare them for paid summer internships by 11th grade. Strategies included targeted outreach, eligibility consistency, and the importance of competitive wages to ensure engagement and retention.**

- 02 Partnership and Funding Models - Highlighted the importance of establishing partnerships with local employers, community-based organizations, and philanthropic foundations to support paid internships, especially for students facing barriers (e.g., students without work authorization).**

- 03 Employer Engagement and Training - Discussed ways to expand employer partnerships and ensure host employers are prepared to work with young interns effectively. A focus was placed on aligning internship roles with career and technical education (CTE) pathways to maximize impact.**

- 04 Use of Community Resources - Leveraged volunteers, career coaches, and AmeriCorps members to supplement program capacity, offer mentorship, and assist with professional development for students.**

- 05 Equity in Internship Opportunities - Addressed the importance of ensuring equitable access to paid internship opportunities, reducing barriers in application processes, and offering wraparound support (e.g., metro cards, professional attire) for students.**

Learning Journey

Session 3:

Targeted Universalism & Effective Employer Engagement

In this session **the working group manager, Najmah Ahmad** facilitated a goal-setting discussion for the Youth Employment & Career Technical Education (CTE) Working Group, building on insights from previous learning journey sessions. The session focused on beginning the process of establishing a universal goal for Alexandria's youth employment initiatives, using a **targeted universalism** model. Key topics included the need to define universal goals, identify data sources to intentionally inform strategies to increase youth employment and readiness.

Session Details:

- **Recording Link:** [View Recording - 66 minutes](#)
- **Screen Sharing:** [Watch Screen Sharing Session](#)

Key Topics Covered:

- 01 Data-Driven Decision-Making** - The session emphasized the importance of data in setting goals and measuring progress. Discussion included the need for baseline data on youth employment rates, zip-code-specific analysis, and insights into labor market demands. Future presentations from NOVA and Advanced CTE will provide additional data insights.

 - 02 Barriers and Strategies for Youth Employment** - Participants highlighted barriers to youth employment, including limited access to career readiness programs, lack of coordinated outreach, and the need for employer engagement. Strategies discussed included:

 - 03 Developing multilingual community marketing campaigns** to raise awareness of career preparation opportunities & support.

 - 04 Creating a centralized employment opportunities board for youth**, happening through collaboration between ACPS and the Workforce Development Center.

 - 05 Strengthening citywide employer engagement and revitalizing advisory boards** to deepen collaboration and pipeline building.

 - 06 Assessing barriers in job qualifications** to improve accessibility for youth without traditional credentials.

 - 07 Integration and Collaboration** - Discussion focused on avoiding duplication in resources, specifically dashboards and data systems. ACPS and the Workforce Development Center were encouraged to coordinate on a comprehensive job board initiative for youth employment opportunities.

 - 08 Soft Skills Development and Employer Training** - Recognizing the importance of soft skills, participants discussed increasing training for both youth and employers. Employers need support in adjusting to more expansive job pathways and in creating work environments that foster youth development.
-

Learning Journey Session 4: Data & Systems Building

Session Overview: The fourth session in the Youth Employment & CTE Working Group Learning Journey, a presentation from NOVA Community College on data analysis, opportunities & outcomes specific to youth employment in Alexandria, and discussions about systemic barriers and solutions. The group reviewed disaggregated employment data and explored the broader context of youth unemployment, particularly among Hispanic, Black, and immigrant youth populations.

Session Details:

- **Recording Link:** [View Recording - 72 minutes](#)
- **Screen Sharing:** [Watch Screen Sharing Session](#)

Key Topics Discussed:

Employment Data & Disaggregation:

Notable disparities in employment rates based on race and gender were identified:

Hispanic and Latino youth make up 39% of unemployed youth but only 29% of employed youth.

Black youth are also overrepresented in the unemployed population.

Higher unemployment among female youth (56% of unemployed youth) compared to males.

Emphasis was placed on understanding systemic causes behind these disparities, such as barriers to work authorization or the lack of strategically targeted resources.

Barriers to Employment

Systemic Issues: Acknowledgement of generational cycles of poverty, limited access to resources, and lack of opportunities for immigrant youth. Discussions highlighted that survival needs (e.g., shelter, food, safety) often overshadow long-term educational & employment goals.

Access and Awareness: Challenges in reaching and informing Hispanic families and new immigrants about career pathways were noted, with many families facing language and cultural barriers and more innovative engagement strategies needed.

Education and Skills: The group discussed discrepancies in access to career guidance and the importance of pathways that do not require four-year degrees. Suggestions included enhanced mentorship, expanded career counseling, and awareness of alternative pathways, such as certifications and apprenticeships.

Data and Policy Recommendations:

- The session highlighted the need for better data-sharing agreements between Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS), NOVA, and the city to create a comprehensive view of youth employment data.
- Participants emphasized advocacy for policies that would remove barriers to employment, like the requirement for driver's licenses or certain certifications in job postings.

Building Trust and Addressing Systemic Challenges:

- The group acknowledged a historical lack of trust in career readiness programs, particularly among minority communities. Discussions emphasized the need to repair trust by being transparent about past inequities and explaining how new approaches are different and more inclusive.
- The importance of creating safe and supportive work environments was also discussed, with a focus on training employers to reduce discrimination and re-traumatization for youth entering the workforce.

Learning Journey Session 5: Supporting Immigrant Youth and English Language Learners

Session Overview: The session focused on strategies to enhance equity and access in preparation programs for English Language Learners (ELLs), including discussions around systemic barriers and solutions.

Session Details:

- **Recording Link:** [View Recording - 65 minutes](#)
- **Screen Sharing:** [Watch Screen Sharing Session](#)

Key Topics Discussed:

Improving Equity and Access in CTE Programs for ELLs:

- Insights from **Advanced CTE's "Making Good on the Promise"** series, emphasizing the need for honest conversations about CTE's historical shortcomings to build trust with learners and families.
- Data indicates that high-quality CTE programs positively impact academic performance and graduation rates for ELLs, and that these programs should be adapted to better meet the diverse needs of immigrant students.

Challenges for ELLs:

1. **Curriculum and Assessment:** The need for differentiated instruction based on students' goals—employment readiness vs. post-secondary education—was highlighted.
2. **Language Barriers:** Placement challenges arise for ELL students with limited English proficiency, especially for work-based learning opportunities. Participants discussed the potential of partnering with bilingual community organizations to address this gap.
3. **Social and Economic Barriers:** Many ELLs face economic challenges, work outside of school, and take on family responsibilities. Wraparound supports are critical for supporting these students' academic and career journeys.
4. **Community and Employer Engagement:**
5. **Small Business Partnerships:** the challenge of engaging small businesses in supporting work-based learning due to language and communication barriers. Suggestions included identifying bilingual employers and hosting community engagement events.
6. **Alumni Support:** A student, shared her own challenges transitioning from high school to post-secondary education, emphasizing the value of alumni support networks. The group discussed leveraging alumni as mentors or ambassadors for CTE programs.
7. **Leveraging Funding for CTE Programs:**
8. **Perkins V and WIOA Funds:** federal funding opportunities through Perkins V and WIOA to support CTE for ELLs, including funds for special populations, subsidized transitional jobs, and wraparound supports. Examples from other states, such as Georgia and Pennsylvania, were shared to illustrate how these funds can be used.
9. **Funding for Wraparound Supports:** Perkins V and WIOA allow for covering costs like transportation, childcare, and language-specific career counseling, which could be critical in expanding access for ELLs.

Data and Communication Challenges:

Participants noted the lack of consistent data on ELLs in post-secondary education and the need for better data-sharing across schools and city agencies.

Communicating program opportunities remains a challenge. Alexandria's Workforce Development Center highlighted difficulties in reaching disconnected youth for work experience programs. Suggestion emerged on hosting centralized community events to improve outreach.

Best Practices and Technological Innovation:

Washington State iBEST Program: The integrated basic education and skills training model in CTE was cited as an example of effective team-teaching that helps ELLs develop language and technical skills simultaneously.

Professional Development for Educators: Arizona and Oregon were mentioned as examples where states have invested in culturally responsive training for educators to better support diverse learners.