



Tipping the Scale: Opening Opportunities for Systems-Involved Youth

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About Jobs for the Future

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INTRODUCTION

“Scaling to us has been primarily looking at how to embed LEAP in the work we do. Coaches are including postsecondary exploration and transition into their work with young people in a seamless way Young people don’t need to know they are in a ‘program.’ We’re scaling the best practices, not a program.”

—Felipe Longoria, chief executive officer, Central Plains Services Center, Nebraska

“We are trying to take what we are learning in Anchorage and deliver it appropriately in rural contexts around the state We have moved from responding to homelessness to a proactive space, working with system partners, state, city, and school districts to solve some of the issues causing young people to become homeless.”

—Josh Louwerse, director of statewide initiatives, Covenant House Alaska

“From early on in the initiative, we were pushing on how to move from a program to embedding LEAP into the system. How do we make it just the way we do work here in the Twin Cities? Build it into the curriculum into the standards, not make it separate?”

—Kristi Snyder, leader of the launch of the LEAP initiative at Project for Pride in Living (PPL), Minnesota

The program leaders quoted here represent organizations and partnerships that are part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) national initiative. LEAP aims to help young people ages 14 through 25 who have been involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, parenting youth, or youth who have experienced homelessness succeed in school and at work by building and expanding education and employment pathways. Now in the initiative’s seventh year, the partnerships are focusing on how to spread the impact of their work to these priority populations of young people whose strengths have too often been underestimated and whose needs have too often not been met.

Efforts to help young people in these priority groups move onto education and employment pathways have long been the purview of overburdened public systems, with a scattering of smaller, more intensive programming available via nonprofits and various philanthropic efforts. The LEAP initiative takes a different approach. Since 2015, a set of local and national organizations with evidence-based models have collaborated to develop opportunity pathways that build on the assets brought by these young people while adapting to their particular needs, and then to embed these pathways in broader ecosystems comprised of public-private partnerships that can help to sustain and grow these solutions.

This brief shares learnings from the community of LEAP organizations and partners as they continue to deepen their practices to enhance the positive impact and durability of programming while also scaling to reach greater numbers of young people in similar situations.¹ After a brief description of the national and local partnering organizations, the first section of the brief explores enhancements that the partners have made to the national models and the consequent development of a set of six core elements of LEAP opportunity pathways that help define *what* is being scaled.

The second section focuses on *how* the partnerships are carrying out the scaling work. Drawing examples from the LEAP partners, we explore four different approaches to scaling up opportunity:

- Spreading strategies and practices to other units of a multifaceted organization
- Expanding to reach additional populations
- Working with public system partners to support opportunity pathways
- Spreading geographically

Finally, the brief shares five emerging lessons that the local partners are learning about what really matters in scaling the work—centering the voices of young people; clarity on what is being scaled; staying nimble and strategic; fidelity to and the flexibility of the models being adapted; and the consistency of commitments to the initiative.

SIZING THE TARGET POPULATION

Child Welfare System Impacts:

- In 2020, 407,493 children and youth were living in foster care.
- Approximately 69,274 (17%) of them are between the ages of 16 and 20.
- Each year 37,000 young people (16–20) exit foster care.
- In 2020, 20,000 young people (16–20) exited foster care without reuniting with parents or having another permanent family home.

Justice System Impacts:

- On any given day, over 48,000 youth in the United States are confined in facilities away from home as a result of juvenile justice or criminal justice involvement.
- Nearly one in 10 of confined youth are incarcerated in adult jails and prisons, where they face greater safety risks and fewer age-appropriate services are available to them.
- Of the 43,000 youth in juvenile facilities, more than two-thirds (69 percent) are 16 or older.

Homelessness:

- Approximately 30 percent of people experiencing homelessness are younger than age 24.
- 24,000 18-to-24-year-olds (not in households with children) are homeless.
- Another 14,000 are in households with at least one adult.
- Of parenting 18-to-24-year-olds, 8,637 are homeless.

Sources: Kids Count, [Department of Housing and Urban Development's \(HUD\) 2018 annual report on Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Programs Homeless Populations and Subpopulations \(PDF | 87 KB\)](#)



SCALING WHAT WORKS: NATIONAL PARTNERS/ LOCAL INNOVATION

From the outset, the major goal of the LEAP initiative has been to substantially increase positive education and employment outcomes for youth and young adults who have experienced the child welfare and/or justice systems or have experienced homelessness and/or early parenting. In the early years of the initiative, the emphasis was on developing the evidence base of strategies and practices that are effective in launching young people in the target groups into future pathways. More recently, the focus has turned to scaling the solutions that work. With MDRC as an evaluation partner during the first four years, and Equal Measure as a current evaluation partner focused on systems change aspects of the initiative, LEAP can draw on both qualitative and quantitative data to help guide this process.²

To accomplish this ambitious multiyear agenda, the LEAP initiative has a set of national and local partners. Jobs for the Future (JFF) and Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) are national organizations with a track record of working effectively with local partners to help young people in underresourced communities access and succeed in education and employment pathways. Both the JFF Back on Track: Postsecondary Success model and the JAG model offer tested frameworks, models, tools, training, and coaching to local partners—a set of organizations across the country with a track record of helping young people build a sense of connection and belonging, and a firm commitment to improving the life chances of young people in the target populations. SMI, a national training and partnership development organization, coordinates the initiative, leads cross-site convenings, and helps with partnership development and provision of technical assistance to the sites.

The JFF and JAG Models

JFF has honed its evidence-based Back on Track: Postsecondary Success model during more than a decade of working with local nonprofit and community-based organizations to serve young adults who must be reengaged to complete a high school credential or who have that credential yet lack a clear pathway to postsecondary educational, training, and employment opportunities. The model has three phases:

- 1) enriched preparation to ensure participants have the skills and habits of mind to succeed in postsecondary education and training;
- 2) bridge programming to smooth the transition into postsecondary education or training—through provision of college and career readiness skills, counseling and guidance, career development, and help in accessing postsecondary education; and
- 3) first-year (and beyond) support once the young people transition into postsecondary options.

As part of the LEAP initiative, JFF works with local partners to implement the bridging and first-year support phases of the model.

JAG has a 40-plus year history of helping young people who have not yet obtained a high school credential to do so, while also equipping them with the work and life skills they need to access quality jobs and/or acquire a postsecondary education. The JAG model has two phases: In the Active Phase, participants are co-enrolled in JAG and a high school diploma or high school equivalency program. JAG provides participants with a

staff mentor who uses the JAG National Curriculum to guide them in the development of core competencies, as well as with counseling and guidance, career development and postsecondary education placement services, and leadership opportunities. This phase can be delivered either in an alternative school, where the curriculum is offered as a class, or in a community organization where out-of-school students participate in one-on-one or group activities with a JAG staff person introducing the competencies. Upon completion of the Active Phase, participants move into a Follow-Up Phase of at least 12 months of monthly check-ins and support services.

This report features the work of six local partnerships, each working with one or both of the national partners: Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD); Covenant House, Alaska (CHA); The Door; Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF); Project for Pride in Living (PPL); and SBCS (formerly South Bay Community Services). Although all the local partners offer youth and workforce development services, each has brought a unique set of assets to the table, differing from one another on a number of key dimensions—from their institutional form and arrangements to the focus populations they serve.

For example, several are large place-based organizations, offering a wide range of services and programs to youth and young adults across a large county or city, and in a few cases offering these services to older adults as well. One is a statewide children and family foundation, and another is the largest provider of services to homeless and runaway youth in the state. As participants in LEAP, all agreed to focus on the target populations of systems-involved young people.

Local and national partners collaborate within a “not too tight, not too loose” approach to working together honoring the importance of both fidelity to core elements of the models and flexibility to make adjustments based on the experiences, input, needs, and desires of the young people. It was understood from the beginning that the local partners would develop enhancements to the national models based on the particular assets, experiences, input, needs, and aspirations of the young people enrolled in LEAP. This has meant listening attentively when participants talk about their hopes and dreams as well as the barriers they often face when they try to access services, and including participants in key design decisions.

Several types of enhancements have emerged from this collaborative process:

- **More choice:** Participants have let their programs know that they want the same opportunities they see their more privileged peers as having. Hearing this

sentiment from young people, the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation went from working with one college partner to forming multiple postsecondary partnerships. Many of the other local partners, including The Door, CRCDC, and Covenant House Alaska have added opportunity pathways in career fields they had not included before.

- **More holistic:** Housing has emerged as a critical issue in a number of the sites. After holding youth forums to learn what young people who were experiencing homelessness needed, Covenant House Alaska opened the Covey Academy, a new state-of-the-art training center, along with nearby micro-apartments for 18-to-24-year-olds who needed housing in order to take advantage of the training pathways. In their work with in-school youth, they have also added “permanency navigators” and housing to the basic JAG model. When staff at The Door realized how many of their participants were pregnant or parenting, they added programming that would offer these young people the help they needed to participate in the training.
- **More personalized and individualized:** Participants come into the programs with widely varying schooling histories, skill sets, and life circumstances, looking for and needing different types and levels of instruction as well as supports. Although local partners saw key advantages to the cohort model of enrolling a group of participants together and supporting them as they moved through a sequence of opportunities, they quickly heard from both staff and participants about the importance of personalization, whether delivering services through the cohort model or one-on-one. To keep young people who are parents or have jobs or court dates that make it hard to get to set class times engaged, SBCS went from a strict cohort model to a more flexible approach where participants could do classes with a coach, bring their babies to a group class, or access the class on Google classroom. In spreading the model across the rural parts of the state, the partners in Nebraska are training coaches who were already working one-on-one with youth transitioning from foster care on self-sufficiency planning to prioritize college and career planning. These trusted coaches are helping them to navigate the systems that are part of this journey.

In moving into the scaling phase of the LEAP initiative, enhancements such as these have helped national and local partners determine what they are scaling: which aspects of the JFF or JAG model and the LEAP initiative overall, with what adjustments and enhancements, constitute the “it” that they will spread. Specifically, national and local

partners are making decisions about how best to deliver the framework of supports and opportunities that national partners bring in light of the particular strengths, needs, prior experiences, and goals of the target groups of young people. They are also taking into account each local partner's unique programmatic and political context—and using all of this information in determining the most cost-effective way to deepen and broaden the impact of the initiative.

Over time, drawing on emergent lessons from their early scaling efforts, as well as the findings from the MDRC evaluation, the national and local partners have arrived at a set of six core elements of supportive educational and career pathways.³

- Equity-Centered and Inclusive Environments
- Flexible Learning Experiences Tailored to Young Peoples' Needs and Responsive to the Labor Market
- Youth-Centered Design
- Support in Meeting Basic Needs and Navigating Systems
- Empowering Relationships
- Formalized Structures for Collaboration and Shared Accountability

These core elements are intended to serve as guideposts in the immediate work of negotiating the tensions between depth and breadth, fidelity and flexibility, quality and spread, and ultimately in helping public systems, institutions, and nonprofit organizations effectively serve the target populations.

“

We put a lot of value on the individual relationships. We also try to be mindful that staff don't feel overwhelmed by how many young people they are working with. The types of case management and conversations we have with young people matter. Deepening those relationships is a key.”

–Nell Rainey, director of system-involved youth at The Door in New York City



SCALING STRATEGIES

In addition to clarity on what is being scaled, local partners are making critical decisions as to how they will increase the footprint and impact of LEAP. They are asking themselves: What strategies are we best positioned to put in place given current conditions? Where can we find allies and partners in this work?

Across the partnerships, four approaches to scaling have emerged:

- Spreading strategies and practices across a multifaceted organization
- Expanding to additional populations
- Spreading geographically
- Working with public-sector partners to promote opportunity pathways

Two of these approaches—reaching out to additional or new populations and spreading geographically—constitute traditional approaches to scaling. Develop a strong program and then use it with greater numbers of young people. The other two

take a somewhat different approach, one that is reflected in what Felipe Longoria says in the quote at the beginning of this paper: “We’re scaling the best practices, not a program.” The examples of spreading across a multifaceted organization drawn from the efforts of SBCS in San Diego and The Door in New York City elucidate what this looks like and how it can begin to have an impact on the way staff work with the young people entering through many different doors of the organization as well as on the overall efficacy of the organization.

The subsection focusing on the strategy of scaling through systems change efforts offers three examples of how local partners are approaching these efforts. The Nebraska Children and Families Foundation and the Project for Pride in Living in Minnesota have both been instrumental in creating cross-sector networks to push for policy changes to address systems barriers that are negatively impacting the education and career success of young people in the target populations. The Door’s approach to systems change starts from their core value of centering youth and youth-led change efforts. Staff see systems change as long-term work that begins by developing a group of young people and staff who inform key people in the relevant city agencies about their needs and make recommendations for specific changes that will make a difference in their lives. In all three cases, the systems change efforts are complementary to other scaling strategies that the local partners are employing.

This section of the brief describes each of the four scaling approaches separately, highlighting examples of how different local partners have gone about this iterative work. It is important to note, however, that most of the local partners are actually engaging in more than one strategy. In some cases, they have started with one approach to scaling and then, once this was in place, found that they could layer in one or more additional approaches as well. In other cases, a local partner decided that they could get more traction by moving from an initial strategy that was hitting barriers to another approach that would be more straightforward to implement, while continuing to lay groundwork for the initial strategy, or by seizing an emergent opportunity like leveraging American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) resources to support a scale strategy.

Spreading Strategies and Practices Across a Multifaceted Organization

Many of the LEAP sites are large, multifaceted organizations offering an array of services to a range of youth and adult populations. Leaders in several of these organizations have seen an opportunity to deepen and broaden the reach and impact

of the LEAP work by intentionally engaging and training staff in other units of their own organizations to adopt key aspects of the pathway model(s) they had begun implementing. As the examples offered here highlight, these internal scaling efforts have the added benefit of creating greater synergy and efficiencies inside of the organization and a greater capacity to spread the approaches externally as well.

Spreading the LEAP tools and practices internally was the initial scaling strategy at **SBCS** in San Diego County, California. SBCS is an organization with over 400 staff, offering a range of services to as many as 50,000 children, youth, and families across the county each year. At the start, the LEAP work lived within their career and technical programming. Other units at SBCS, such as their Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Independent Living Skills initiative (ILS), their Justice and Community Core Skills programs (JCCS), and Rapid Rehousing, referred young people in the target population to LEAP, as did a nearby charter school and the San Diego school district.

As the initiative matured, LEAP staff turned to working with some of these units, as well as with the organization's Promise Neighborhood programs to help them focus more intentionally on helping young people in the target populations to prepare to bridge to education and employment pathways. With the help of their national partners, SBCS began developing a playbook and a technical assistance strategy to use in this internal spread strategy. As Robin Graham, the former program director, explains: "We started internally with the teams that were not as strongly focused on education—like our WIOA and transitional housing for foster youth units We provided education modules to case managers to put into their toolbox and enhance what they were already doing We then added Alternatives to Detention and the Promise Neighborhoods teams as well . . . wherever LEAP modules and services could help another program reach its goal" By creating a "no wrong door" experience for young people, SBCS was able to increase enrollment into LEAP within the organization.

When the COVID pandemic shut things down, putting the modules on Google classroom afforded a way to continue to grow this programming and make it available to young people and staff across the organization. Christopher Zures, the current program director and Alejandro Garcia, the program coordinator, describe how this supports the broader goal of becoming "more program and content-focused rather than contract-specific It's like a virtual college campus where we can customize components for different partners."

The staff soon realized that having different programs in SBCS work together in this way would benefit the organization as a whole. Graham explains: “We were not just scaling LEAP—we were asking how we can learn from each other and where could we do things more collaboratively—like a common intake process among us so we can make smart referrals to programs within our own organization and those programs can also benefit from the common playbook. And resources could be used more effectively. We already had common external partners. Now there could be a one-person point of contact . . .” Perhaps most importantly, notes Graham, this supported SBCS’s ability to serve young people holistically, putting them in the driver’s seat where they could set the destination and step on the gas. “It was exciting to be a part of that.”

Early wins in spreading internally have led SBCS to begin to offer their playbook and technical assistance to several external partners as well. With the help of their national partners, SBCS is now developing a technical assistance function that will allow them to share the opportunity pathways work of LEAP to additional external partners across San Diego County.

The Door, in New York City, offers another example of how a multifaceted organization can make use of the LEAP tools and training internally to create a stronger bridge to postsecondary success for young people with systems involvement. In the first phase of LEAP, The Door added staff dedicated to working with systems-involved youth; broadened their outreach and recruitment efforts to include the relevant city departments, foster care agencies, and additional community-based organizations; and introduced the Back on Track framework to the Career and Education Services programs to guide them in adding new bridge offerings and the first year of postsecondary supports, and in setting new short, mid, and long-term outcome goals specific to systems-involved youth.

In the second phase of the work, staff across all of the organization’s Career and Education Services mapped program design elements to the Back on Track framework and core elements and aligned key objectives. The staff then received training from JFF to help them think about their work from the perspective of the trajectory of the young people moving from secondary education attainment as the end-goal to postsecondary transition and success. The goal, explains Nell Rainey, director of systems-involved youth, was to “put the concept of bridging into all of the training options at The Door.”

Emphasizing postsecondary planning, preparation, and transition across all of the programming at The Door led to a different way of working within the organization as well. For example, as the HiSet program, which had been focused primarily on GED preparation and attainment, began to incorporate bridging and postsecondary planning into its focus, it became important for the HiSet team to know and work more closely with the Bridge to College, internship, and work-based learning staff to ensure a warm handoff. Another key step the organization took was to expand the number of postsecondary pathways that young people can pursue while in their programs.

Adding a bridging component to The Door's high school equivalency program has also had the effect of increasing the length of time that young people stay engaged with the organization, hence deepening the potential impact on them. As Rainey puts it: "The types of case management and the conversations we have with young people matter We define scale in terms of the depth of the work we are able to do with young people, and that is related to the length of time that we have with them."

As at SBCS, as the internal spreading of LEAP has gained momentum, The Door has also taken steps to bring this approach into their partnerships with other agencies offering services to young people who are systems-involved, especially to inform and enhance referral networks from these agencies to the postsecondary pathways offered at The Door.

Expanding to Additional Populations

As organizations have formed partnerships, both within their own organization and externally with other public and private agencies, some have also found opportunities to reach additional populations of young people—beyond the original target population—who can benefit from LEAP supports and opportunities.

At the **Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD)**, leaders are finding that new partnerships can play an important role in helping them reach and engage additional populations of young people in LEAP services. For example, CRCD partnered with the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA) and a Los Angeles City Council member to open a Neighborhood Resource Center that provides employment training and job placement for youth and young adults, as well as small business support and access to community resources. CHIRLA, which is co-located at this site, offers immigration consultation and legal services, including assistance with DACA renewal and removal proceedings among other services. "Through this and

other cross-collaboration efforts, this facility will offer much needed support to all our low-income, system-involved, and undocumented clients, community members, and their families,” explains Latea Davis, associate director of special projects.

CRCD’s Project Tipping Point (PTP), currently co-delivered through CRCD’s partnership with LA Trade Technical College, offers college and career readiness, postsecondary education support, high-touch case management, and housing support services to current and former foster youth. CRCD is now expanding PTP through establishing partnerships with two additional community colleges and, at the same time, strengthening the housing assistance component to address and eliminate barriers foster youth face while trying to navigate through life. “CRCD found that homelessness and housing instability was the most significant life circumstance that has the power to reverse progress and/or end program participation in PTP,” notes Jasmine Scales, youth and education manager.

For **The Door**, the realization that many young people had given birth during the pandemic led them to expanding their reach to both parenting young adults and their children. The organization added a parenting cohort with a special eight-week program in which they had opportunities to reflect both on how they were parented and how they would like to parent their children, as well as access to parenting experts and resources—from help with lactation, to access to a preschool network. “Historically we have worked with adolescents,” comments Nell Rainey, “now we are trying a two-generation approach.”

Spreading Geographically Across the State

Several of the LEAP local partners are statewide organizations that started with local programs and have the potential to reach beyond the original LEAP site to other parts of the state. This scaling strategy has the advantage of both reaching more young people across the state who can benefit from the LEAP strategies and approaches and creating a stronger base from which to advocate for policies that will remove barriers and/or create new opportunities for young people. Governors’ offices and state legislators are more likely to take up policy change if an initiative goes beyond the urban centers. In both examples described here, the LEAP initiative began in populous urban centers and is now spreading to rural areas where young people often have fewer opportunities.

Covenant House is a national nonprofit with the mission of providing housing and

supportive services to youth facing homelessness or who were victims of human trafficking, and to offer these young people a path to independence. As an affiliate of the national organization, **Covenant House Alaska (CHA)** began, in 2016, implementing and enhancing a JAG classroom in their shelter setting for youth, ages 13 through 20, in Anchorage, Alaska.

The original scaling idea was to partner with the school district to reach homeless young people in high schools throughout Anchorage. When leadership changes and then the pandemic created barriers to scaling this in the Anchorage School District, “We pivoted to statewide opportunities,” explains Josh Louwerse, director of statewide initiatives. “In Alaska, the majority of services are delivered in the hub cities and less available in rural areas.” CHA leaders surmised that if there were better supports and opportunities in some of those regions, there would be fewer young people ending up seeking shelter and services in Anchorage. As Louwerse notes: “We are moving from solely being a youth homelessness response proactively working to better the systems in our state that contribute to youth homelessness.”

The CHA team began taking a statewide look at the problems of homelessness and at potential solutions that various agencies were trying to put into place. Working with the governor’s office and the state Department of Education, they began planning how to take what they were learning in Anchorage and deliver it appropriately in rural contexts around the state, starting with a pilot at the high school in Bethel, a remote region with a majority Alaska Native population. The hope is that by putting JAG, enhanced by other services and supports, on the ground in a rural community and showing success, leaders across the state will gain a better understanding of the value of this model and how it can be a potential asset across the state. The plan is then to take the template and learnings from the Bethel pilot and work with state and local leaders to replicate the model in other rural communities.

Of course, in a state the size of Alaska, geographic challenges remain. Western Alaska has over 200 villages, many of which can only be reached by plane, boat, or snow machines. By continuing to work with the governor’s office, the state Department of Education, and the state Department of Labor, CHA leaders are hopeful that they can lift an Alaska version of a statewide adoption of JAG.

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF) is a statewide intermediary that braids public and private resources and grants them back out to providers and communities. For the LEAP initiative, a key strategy of their Connected Youth Initiative

entails implementing JFF's Back on Track Postsecondary Success model. NCFE works closely with long-term partner Central Plains Center for Services, a statewide, community-based organization with the mission of providing coaching and case management support to older youth who are transitioning from the foster care system across the state. NCFE provides the funding for this work in part through the Chafee Independent Living funds and the Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) that they administer, as well as through the Casey Foundation LEAP grant.

In the first phase of the LEAP initiative, implementation of the model centered on eligible young people who were in Omaha or Lincoln. Central Plains designated two of their PALS (Preparation for Adult Living Services) coaches in these two major urban areas to receive training in the model. These coaches, who typically work one-on-one with eligible youth in their region on becoming self-sufficient adults, had specialized roles specific to those interested in pursuing college. They provided one-on-one bridging supports and worked with two- and four-year colleges in each of the cities to collaborate on providing first-year supports.

In 2021, Central Plains and NCFE partnered with JFF to introduce the Back on Track model to all 28 of the Central Plains coaches who collectively reach as many as 1,500 young people a year. This virtual (pandemic era) training has been followed by JFF coaching calls with organizational leaders to support them in further spread of the model, and by Central Plains through in-person trainings for all coaches and through updates to the training resources. Four dedicated PALS coaches, two in Lincoln and Omaha and two more to cover other areas of the state, work with young people with a stated interest in postsecondary and establish connections to nearby postsecondary institutions and training programs. They also serve as a resource to other PALS coaches to enable them to provide advice and support, as needed, to any of their young people who may be considering college and other postsecondary options.

Felipe Longoria, the chief executive officer of Central Plains explicates this rollout. "Scaling to us has been primarily embedding LEAP in the work we do . . . Coaches include elements of the Back on Track model into their work with young people . . . it's how we prioritize careers and postsecondary education with them and help them get prepared and bridge into those. We're scaling the best practices, not a program."

More specifically, after helping young people recognize their own strengths and the types of financial aid and supports potentially available to them, coaches offer those who express interest in getting a postsecondary education one-on-one assistance

in everything from preparing for the SATs, going on a college tour, and filling out applications for admissions and for financial aid, to connecting them to college advisors and other young people like themselves who are going there. In addition, coaching continues throughout the first year and sometimes beyond to help young people to progress academically and manage their life needs.

The effort to engage more college partners has also expanded—fueled by partnerships seeded by NCFE as well as Central Plains coaches. Initially, LEAP youth were served through three community colleges and four four-year colleges in the Lincoln and Omaha areas. Today, young people have access to LEAP in 12 four-year colleges, one two-year college, one vocational school, and six community colleges in five different geographic areas of the state. As Sara Riffel, vice president of older youth systems of NCFE notes: “We’re still learning lessons, but making more progress . . . We can invite college partners in to hear firsthand how LEAP has been beneficial to colleges in Omaha or Lincoln. And we have young people that have successfully completed LEAP and graduated from the schools tell their own stories and advocate for themselves and for other young people with the cross-sector partners.”

Working With Public System Partners to Support Opportunity Pathways

All of the LEAP partnerships include systems partners. These are usually representatives from the public city, county, and/or state agencies that the young people in LEAP are currently interacting with or have interacted with on a regular basis. In some cases, these agencies contract with or grant discretionary funds to the organizations for some or all of the services provided to young people whom they deem eligible, according to the guidelines and regulations governing the agency.

Such arrangements are important to organizational sustainability, but in themselves don’t necessarily result in a dramatic increase in the number of young people who gain access to the competencies and on-ramps they need to succeed in opportunity pathways that lead to financial stability and independence. At this point in the initiative, several of the LEAP sites are in the process of moving from the relatively loose structure of periodic meetings with system partners to setting explicit systems change and policy goals.

In addition to the scaling that the **Nebraska Children and Families Foundation** is achieving through geographically spreading to additional college partners across the state (described on page 18), the Foundation is also inviting these partners to join with

the public statewide agencies, including the Nebraska departments of education, health and human services, and labor, and the state public university system as active participants in “Fostering Achievement in Nebraska Network (FANN), a cross-sector network created by the Foundation as a core vehicle for reaching their scaling and sustainability objectives.

Launched in (2020), FANN functions as a statewide collaborative to promote aligned action around education and career success for young Nebraskans who are systems-involved or lacking opportunities to connect to education and employment. The network is placing a particular focus on college access for foster youth through promoting college affordability and advocacy for supportive services to help young people persist in college. In its first 18 months, FANN has created a road map of what the partners want to tackle together. For example, the network is currently working on a “Foster Care Full Ride” bill in Nebraska to address financial gaps and cover college tuition, room and board, and other expenses for foster care youth. The passage of this legislation would make a substantial difference to thousands of young people in the state who leave or never enter postsecondary education or training for financial reasons.

Project for Pride in Living (PPL) is a large multiservice organization in Hennepin County, Minnesota, with programs devoted to housing, jobs, and career pathways for adults and for youth in the greater Minneapolis area. As part of the LEAP initiative, PPL has integrated the JAG model of competency development and career connections into its youth career pathway program, which is delivered through alternative high schools in Hennepin County and a reengagement center offering high school equivalency diplomas and adult education. “We saw this as a way to develop lasting partnerships among key institutions, by focusing them on a clear and measurable set of outcomes based on shared data,” notes Kristy Snyder, who led the launch of the LEAP initiative at PPL. And, she adds: “We were interested from early on in the question of how to move from a relatively small program to embedding key features of LEAP into the larger education system.”

In preparing to spread the program into the school district in adjacent Ramsey County (where St. Paul is), the LEAP team at PPL saw the need for policy changes to address systems barriers that could threaten the ultimate impact of the initiative on the life chances of the young people supported through LEAP. For example, juvenile records in Minnesota—including arrest records that resulted in no charges and participation

in diversion programs—are not sealed and can serve as a hiring deterrent, as well as impede access to housing. Rather than work on this alone, PPL connected with the Minnesota Coalition for Youth Justice, which is working to have juvenile records automatically sealed.

Emily Terrell, director of youth employment strategies at PPL describes the next phase of expansion: “By combining the ARPA dollars from both the City of St. Paul and Ramsey County, PPL’s LEAP will expand to eight sites over the course of two years. This organizing of the youth ecosystem in Ramsey County and connecting those youth-serving sites to the larger LEAP network in Minnesota will create smoother access to resources for youth who often don’t see or care about the system or municipal boundaries that so often limit their opportunities. The expansion also offers a wider base of young people to inform and influence relevant policy on a state level.”

While PPL remains the anchor institution for the LEAP initiative, the organization now shares much of the advocacy and policy work with Youthprise, a statewide organization with a history of advocating for greater equity for young Black people and other youth of color in Minnesota. In recognition of the importance of youth having a powerful voice in this process, a young adult now co-leads the network with Snyder, who has moved to Youthprise. As Snyder points out: “It’s asking too much of an organization to run a program and all that requires and also hold the systems work.” As collaborators, PPL and Youthprise have created a broad table where a network of program providers, young leaders, school districts, state agencies, and employers can work together. This network is focused on achieving the policy changes that support opportunity pathways for and with young people.

From early in the initiative, lead staff at **The Door** have worked on forging a partnership with the Administration of Children’s Services (ACS) in New York City. The goal, according to Nell Rainey, the director of systems-involved youth at The Door, was “to bring the spirit of LEAP and youth development to their staff so that a larger number of young people could be impacted by the way we were approaching the LEAP work.”

As the initiative got underway, the ACS list of priorities included educational pathways and financial stability for young people in the system—which aligned well with the LEAP work. However, despite this alignment, notes Rainey, the systems work proved challenging: “In doing systems work, you have to find someone to work with within the system . . . to make sure that the folks you are connecting with in the system spaces have bought into that agenda . . . and then have the skills, the power, and influence in

the organization to move it forward.”

One strategy that The Door is using to address the challenges of this work is to engage young people in the program as an integral part of the process. “We developed a group of young people and staff to talk about things that need to shift in the system, with the goal of drafting recommendations to bring to Mayor Adams . . . and he could share with the new commissioner of ACS,” explains Rainey. “Then we created a panel that we videoed with four young people on it reflecting on their needs. They were super impressive. We brought key stakeholders from ACS, the city, and other agencies to hear what they had to say. Two people at the assistant commissioner level at ACS came, were very moved, and made a commitment to move the work forward.”

When asked to offer some lessons for others attempting to do systems change work as part of scaling an initiative, Rainey summed up this way: “ACS is a huge bureaucracy—which makes the work daunting, but it could also have a big impact. Scaling is very long-term work. The approaches you try won’t all work and then you have to try something else. We’ve been working on this since 2019 and are still in the zone of starting.”



EMERGING LESSONS ON SCALING

Although LEAP sites are still early in the scaling process, their experiences offer guideposts that may be of immediate use to other organizations and partnerships grappling with how to increase the impact of their social innovations. This is complex and long-term work, requiring commitments and consistent efforts from key stakeholders. As the initiative continues, there will no doubt be additional discoveries, conditions, and factors emerging that can add to the storehouse of knowledge on how to spread opportunity pathways to young people who have too often remained invisible.

Centering the voices of young people matters

As the LEAP organizations become actively engaged in spreading and scaling the work, they are doubling down on their commitment to consult with and listen attentively to participants, many of whom face a unique set of systemic barriers. Such listening is especially important in determining best practices for young people whose assets

and needs have too often remained invisible and poorly understood. In some cases, the local partners are relying on formal structures, such as a youth council or youth representatives for decision-making bodies, but more often they simply invite young people—in classes and/or in one-on-one conversations—to share their views on what has worked best for them and should be part of what is getting scaled.

In creating bigger tables of cross-systems partners and networks of public and private providers, LEAP organization leaders are also being intentional about ensuring that their participants and alumni have the opportunity to participate—to share their stories and voice their opinions. They are finding that young people are especially effective ambassadors at these tables, helping to deepen the engagement and buy-in of the systems partners.

Clarity on what is being scaled matters

A common theme across all the sites is the strong desire to hold focus on the quality of what is being spread as well as on how many young people LEAP partners will be able to impact through their scaling efforts. The local partners in LEAP are explicitly targeting groups of young people whose life circumstances may impede their efforts to find and persevere in pathways leading to positive educational and employment outcomes. The initial strong outcomes of the LEAP initiative were possible because of a combination of regular training and coaching by the national partners on the specifics of their tested and evidence-based models with locally driven enhancements and modifications to ensure the effectiveness of the model for the target groups.

In moving the work forward, local and national partners are grappling with clarifying what is being scaled—which elements of the JAG and/or JFF Back on Track models, adapted for the particular assets and support needs of the target populations, are most critical to retain and even bolster in new sites and with new populations, and what other activities and strategies could be added to further operationalize the LEAP core elements. And this means addressing the potential tensions inherent in trying to maintain depth and quality while also achieving more widespread impact.

In determining what to scale, the partners are considering how to achieve equally positive results on a larger scale. They are weighing such issues as, for example, how to achieve efficiencies in rolling out the work, the level of training and coaching that is both feasible and affordable in geographic spread, and how to maintain a personalized

and even individualized approach while also attempting to reach and serve many more young people. This is the ongoing work of LEAP.

Staying nimble and strategic matters

In choosing a scaling strategy, each of the LEAP local partners engaged in a process of assessing opportunities and challenges afforded by their current circumstances and the current moment. They have made these assessments based on a number of factors, including the resources available; the potential internal and external partners, allies, and champions; the policy conditions; and a cost-benefit analysis of how many in the target population they will reach depending on expenditure of resources.

And this is not just a one-time assessment, as is evident, for example, in how SBCS has used the success of its internal scaling strategy to develop the capacity to train and support external partners in scaling the work, in how CHA and The Door have used the time it takes to develop the necessary relationships with systems partners to expand their own services and impact, and in how the Nebraska partners have built on an existing infrastructure of coaching to expand services and engage postsecondary partners across the state.

Both fidelity and flexibility matter in the partnership of local and national partners

As leaders are moving more fully into the scaling phase of the initiative, new questions are emerging about how to maintain the balance of fidelity and flexibility. What kinds of agreements and buy-in do we need from implementation and systems partners to ensure that the quality of the opportunity pathways remains high? How can we work with partners to incorporate some of the practices of personalization that we have seen help young people to persevere? What can we do to help create the policy conditions that will support quality at scale?

Examples of how the various sites are tackling these questions can be found in the advocacy work of the networks that PPL and Nebraska Children and Families Foundation are supporting, the work to codify the LEAP practices and develop training modules for internal and potentially external partners that SBCS has begun, and the agreements and arrangements with school districts in other parts of the state that CHA is developing.

Across all the sites, local partners have made strong use of the models as well as the coaching and technical assistance offered by national partners to assist in the implementation of the models. They point to how the evidence-based frameworks and services provided by national partners have helped them to become more intentional, explicit, and consistent in preparing young people for postsecondary education and employment opportunities, as well as to develop new services and delivery mechanisms. And they have used outcomes data on these models to help make the case for scaling.

At the same time, leaders of these organizations are vocal in their appreciation of opportunities afforded by national partners to adapt and enhance aspects of their models, and the ongoing support and coaching they have received while making these adaptations. They offer numerous examples of how national partners have helped them to develop training materials that can be used in onboarding new staff, in expanding the work to other units within a large organization, and in engaging a growing set of partners as the original local partner has expanded the work to new geographic areas and to new populations of young people.

Consistency of commitments matter

The LEAP initiative is now in its seventh year. While the ambition to grow the initiative has been present from the beginning, in the early years local partners needed time to establish or strengthen their relationships with the public systems and community-based organizations with a history of working with the target groups of young people, as well as to establish their working relationship with the national partner or partners that would help to anchor their LEAP programming.

Specifically, they needed time to be trained and coached in the model or framework they would adopt and adapt, and then to modify and supplement that model to maximize its effectiveness with the young people in the program—all of which is further complicated when there are staffing transitions. Having selected a model or framework to use to organize supports and opportunities for and with participants, local partners could work on being more intentional in recruiting participants from the target groups and in determining—with the participants—how to deliver those supports and opportunities with a sensitivity to local conditions and enough intensity and consistency over time.

As an awardee of the Social Innovation Fund during the first three years, the initiative focused on developing knowledge for the field about what it takes to tailor evidence-based programming for populations of young people who have not previously had access to such programming. Since then, with follow-on funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and partnering local foundations, LEAP organizations and partners have been able to sustain the momentum achieved in the early years and continue to refine their efforts in preparation for scaling the programming.

Now, as the initiative focuses on these scaling efforts, the continued commitment of all the LEAP partners is a key factor in creating the conditions to make greater impact possible. As the examples in this paper have illustrated, scaling is not linear. The scaling journey may start with one strategy, which, if it is achieving results, may open the possibility to layer in an additional strategy or two. Or, if the first strategy hits roadblocks, it may suggest the need for policy advocacy that will remove these barriers or for focusing in on a different strategy while the first one continues to slowly percolate. Unfortunately, it is all too rare for the commitment to an initiative to be maintained for long enough to take advantage of the opportunities and address the challenges. The experience of the LEAP initiative provides an existence proof of what can happen when an initiative is sustained over a long period of time.



LOOKING AHEAD

As the LEAP initiative moves into the next stage of scaling, the continued commitment of all the organizations and partners will be a key factor in creating the conditions to make greater impact possible. Since the start of LEAP in 2015, the lead organizations have laid a strong foundation for growth. As this brief has illustrated, they have developed a framework of core elements, enhanced practices, and strategies adapted from proven models; nurtured young adult leaders and champions; and built deep partnerships.

As a result of their efforts thus far, thousands of youth and young adults are benefitting from opportunity pathways to education, training, and employment that they have aspired to but previously had little chance of attaining. The LEAP organizations are now poised to build on this foundation and move closer to the ultimate goal of making opportunity pathways accessible to every young person who has experienced systems involvement, homelessness, and/or early childbearing and parenting. This next stage of the work will likely produce a new critical set of lessons as the organizations continue to build their ecosystems of partners and double down on their efforts to establish opportunity pathways at scale by engaging leaders of the public systems that deeply affect the trajectory of the lives of these young people.

ENDNOTES

1. To prepare this brief the author conducted interviews with LEAP partners and reviewed reports and proposals prepared by partners, evaluators, and Casey Foundation officials, as well as historical documents from the initiative.
2. The MDRC evaluation reports can be accessed using this link: <https://www.mdrc.org/project/learn-and-earn-achieve-potential-leap#overview>.
3. See appendix for fuller description of the LEAP core elements and sample activities under each: <https://aefc.app.box.com/s/rv32qlm9mo97f6tg5d166099mvcioqq>



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