

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

LEAP Partnerships: Advancing Educational and Economic Opportunity for Systems-Involved Youth

December 2024

EQUAL
MEASURE

FINDING
PROMISE
FUELING
CHANGE





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In 2016, the Annie E. Casey Foundation launched Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (“LEAP”). This national initiative helped youth and young adults ages 14-25 who have been involved in the foster care or justice systems or who have experienced homelessness succeed in school and work by building and expanding education and employment pathways. The focus on systems-involved young people was intentional. Young people involved with these systems, exiting these systems, or who experience homelessness, have unique challenges as they transition to adulthood. Challenges stemming from their systems involvement may include disrupted schooling, housing instability, limited family support, and trauma.¹ In addition, the systems are not adequately designed to support young people when they transition out of them. LEAP was designed to build and strengthen pathways for these populations and improve their educational and employment outcomes and long-term wellbeing.

In the first three years of LEAP, 10 partnerships across the country adapted and implemented two evidence-based models – JAG (Jobs for America’s Graduates) and Jobs for the Future’s Back on Track – to improve connections to education and career opportunities for systems-involved young adults in their communities. In 2019, six of the LEAP organizations received additional funding to strengthen efforts to expand pathways for young people. Through partnerships with public agencies, postsecondary education, housing, service providers, and more, LEAP partners were working toward a **long-term goal of improving policies and practices to place more systems-involved young people on positive economic trajectories.**

[Equal Measure](#) served as the evaluation and learning partner to better understand how LEAP partnerships were tackling the root causes of disconnection from education and careers experienced by systems-involved youth in their communities. This report shares findings from the evaluation, reflecting on the four learning questions:

- 1. How did the six LEAP partnerships define and implement systems change? What processes did partnerships take to scale systems change across their communities?**

¹ Treskon, Louisa, Wasserman, Kyla, and Vicky Ho. September 2019. Connecting to Opportunity: Lessons on Adapting Interventions for Young People Experiencing Homelessness or Systems Involvement. MDRC.

LEAP Scaling and Systems Organizations (LEAP Partnership Leads)

Coalition for Responsible Community Development, Los Angeles, CA

Covenant House Alaska, Anchorage, AK

The Door, New York, NY

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Lincoln, NE

Project for Pride in Living, Minneapolis, MN

SBCS, San Diego, CA



The overall strategy taken by all six LEAP partnerships was adopting a **holistic approach** to their work with young people. The approach is highly aligned with systems thinking. While education and success in careers might be the end goal, LEAP partnerships focused on the whole person and all the systems they may interact with. They recognized the need to address young people’s basic needs and provide stability to enable success on an education or career pathway.

Under the overarching holistic approach, LEAP partnerships implemented strategies in two main areas: **partnerships** and **advocacy and policy change**. Partnerships both within organizations and across the ecosystem aimed to meet the complex needs of young people and build pathways to education and careers. The partnerships identified advocacy and policy change as critical ways to make systems work better for young people. All the LEAP partnerships participated in this work, and relationships with other organizations, as well as youth engagement, were often essential to identifying and pursuing changes to a wide range of policies and practices within organizations, institutions, and systems. Much of the advocacy and policy change efforts focused on removing barriers within and across systems and increasing access to resources, services, and pathways.

2. What were the critical factors that hindered or accelerated their ability to implement these strategies?

LEAP partnerships described a variety of barriers and accelerants in their work to improve systems and scale education and career pathways. Common barriers to doing broader community and cross-sector work included staff transitions, the time and resources needed to build and maintain partnerships, and community distrust. Some partnerships named the high turnover rate among staff in higher education specifically as a challenge to maintaining those partnerships.

LEAP partnerships also named several accelerants or promising practices that helped advance their systems change and scaling work – the five “Cs” that contributed to greater change:

- **Co-location** of services
- **Coaching** or supportive one-on-one relationships
- **Cultural competence** or understanding the context
- **Champions** at partnering organizations and institutions
- **Credibility** as trusted community organizations

3. What were the signs of success or progress toward making systems changes that benefit systems-involved or homeless young people? To what extent are systems changing and how?

The LEAP partnerships have demonstrated progress in scaling pathways for young people and in helping to change policies that affect young people, both of which represent changing systems and expanding opportunities. The five types of **scaling** or expansion were:

- Geographic expansion
- More youth reached
- Dissemination of promising practices
- Expansion of programmatic options and pathways
- Expansion of partnerships



In addition to scaling, the LEAP partnerships contributed to **policy and practice changes** resulting in tangible benefits for young people. Policy changes removed barriers to access, which resulted in more young people getting the services they needed and accessing them more quickly.

Changing systems is ultimately about making **positive change in young people's lives**. Progress can be measured in the success stories of those who participated in LEAP. Young people spoke of the confidence they gained, how they felt supported by LEAP staff, and the skills, credentials, and jobs that are helping them move along their pathways.

4. How were LEAP participants/youth leaders engaged in and informing LEAP systems change work? How, if at all, did youth leadership and engagement influence the success of systems change work? How might youth leadership have meaningful impact in future systems change work?

Part of changing systems is engaging those most impacted by how those systems operate, including young people. Young people who interact with various systems including education, workforce, foster care, juvenile justice, and others have direct experience in navigating those systems and have ideas about how to make them better. LEAP partnerships approached youth engagement and the development of youth leadership in several ways.

- The Casey Foundation led a **national fellowship program** for LEAP participants to bring youth leaders from across the initiative together.
- The LEAP partnerships aimed to ensure young people built **leadership skills** by embedding skill-building into all programming and services.
- After preparing young people for **advocacy and policy opportunities**, young people participated in advocacy and legislative days, spoke on panels, and attended regional and national conferences.
- Some LEAP partnerships have developed ways to **scaffold opportunities** and create career pathways within their own organizations for young people as they transition from a participant to a young adult leader.
- LEAP partnerships **valued and incorporated youth voice and youth perspectives**, especially those with lived experience of interacting with systems, in their operations and programming.

Engaging youth in authentic ways is not without its challenges. Young people, especially those who are involved in the foster care or justice systems, or who are experiencing homelessness, have many competing demands. While these types of youth leadership experiences may be important to them, it may not be their main priority. LEAP partnerships strongly valued and desired youth involvement and leadership in their programs and organizations; they worked hard to try new approaches and be flexible, adaptable, and understanding of young people.

Conclusion

As the LEAP initiative concludes in 2024, the lessons learned offer a roadmap for future efforts to transform systems and expand opportunities for youth. LEAP has been unique among education and employment pathway efforts in its approach to focus on young people in foster care or involved with the justice system, or experiencing homelessness. LEAP has been intentional in its attention to both programmatic adaptations and changing systems and scaling pathways to education and employment. Many partners noted LEAP gave them the resources and “explicit permission” to think bigger and focus



on partnerships, root causes, policies, and practices. For many involved, LEAP became a mindset and way of working that prioritized partnering.

Based on the learnings from LEAP, we offer the following **recommendations** for those seeking to change complex systems and improve education and career pathways for young people:

- Create an intentional programmatic and systems change agenda.
- Help meet young people's basic needs; otherwise, success on pathways will be limited.
- Work with cross-sector partners; find champions within organizations and institutions.
- Build supportive one-on-one relationships with young people to understand their needs and dreams.
- Work on small and large policy and practices changes; even small changes can make a big difference for young people who are impacted by systems.
- Engage young people in programmatic and systems change work; they have important insights into how systems can better serve young people.

The LEAP partnerships aim to continue their work of helping all young people in their communities achieve economic success through programs and changing policies and practices to ease navigation, access, and persistence, and by using targeted strategies for young people in different contexts and situations.