

# Pathways to Prosperity Model Blueprint:

*A K-12 Implementation Guide for  
Career-Connected School Design*

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Candy Van Burkirk, CANOPS  
Aimee Evan, WestEd

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Across the country, schools are working to help students see stronger connections between what they learn in school and the opportunities available to them after graduation. Many students are asked to make decisions about courses, pathways, credentials, and postsecondary plans before they have had enough exposure to careers, enough time to reflect on their interests, or enough guidance to understand how academic learning connects to future opportunity.

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Career-connected learning is one response to this challenge. At its strongest, it is not a single course, program, or pathway. It is a school design approach that helps students build awareness, explore possibilities, apply academic learning, develop transferable skills, and prepare for both college and career over time.

This *Pathways to Prosperity Model Blueprint* (Blueprint) was developed to help schools and systems learn from the Career Academy Network of Public Schools (CANOPS) and consider how similar practices might be adapted for their own contexts. CANOPS is a public charter school system in South Bend, Indiana, that serves students across grades K–12. Its model is organized around three connected pillars: **College and Career Preparation**, **Professional Learning Communities**, and **Experiential Learning**. Together, these pillars connect academics, career development, adult collaboration, student support, community partnerships, and real-world application across the K–12 experience. This Blueprint does not ask schools to exactly replicate CANOPS. Instead, it is designed to help leaders and educators understand the *design logic* behind the model: what the pillars are, why they matter, how

they work together, and what implementation requires. The Blueprint also describes what schools should consider as they adapt the work for their own students, communities, and organizational capacity.

At the center of the model is a simple, but powerful idea:

*Students are better prepared for the future when schools intentionally connect academic learning, career exploration, adult support, and real-world application across the full K-12 experience.*

This means career preparation does not begin in high school. It begins when young children start building language for interests, strengths, work, community roles, and problem-solving. It deepens in middle school as students explore identity, options, relevance, and emerging interests. It becomes more concrete in high school as students participate in pathways, earn credentials, experience work-based learning, and prepare for postsecondary transitions.

The Blueprint is organized to help schools understand and implement that progression.

## Why This Blueprint Was Developed

The Pathways to Prosperity project was created through a Charter School Program model and dissemination grant to document and share the CANOPS approach with other school and network leaders, teachers, and teams interested in implementing career-connected learning in their schools, charters or otherwise.

The purpose of the Blueprint is to make the model usable beyond the original CANOPS context. It is intended to help schools understand not only what CANOPS does, but also why the model is designed the way it is and which implementation decisions school leaders might need to make.

This document is not a research report, although it is informed by research on career academies, career development, experiential learning, and school improvement. Nor is it a prescriptive checklist. Schools differ in grade span, staffing, partnerships, schedules, resources, student needs, and local workforce context, so a structure that works well in one setting might need to be adapted in another.

Rather, the Blueprint is intended to bridge the space between a promising model and practical implementation.

It is designed to help readers

- understand the core components of a coherent K–12 career-connected learning model;
- see how career preparation develops differently across elementary, middle, and high school;
- identify the leadership, staffing, scheduling, partnership, and professional learning conditions that support implementation;
- recognize common implementation risks before they become major barriers;
- consider how to implement one, two, or all three pillars in ways that fit local context; and
- use the CANOPS model as an exemplar while making thoughtful design decisions for their own schools.

The central question guiding this Blueprint is “What can schools learn from CANOPS about building coherent systems that help students connect learning to real opportunity?”

## Who This Blueprint Is For

Career-connected learning cannot be implemented well by one role alone. Accordingly, the Blueprint is written for the range of roles that make up an implementation team, including district leaders, charter network staff, school administrators, teachers, counselors, pathway directors, student support leaders, workforce partnership staff, and cross-functional design teams who are exploring or strengthening career-connected learning.

Different readers may use the Blueprint in different ways.

- **Network and district leaders** may use it to think about vision, pathway architecture, labor market alignment, partnerships, staffing, funding, data systems, and scaling.
- **School leaders** may use it to think about master schedules, teacher collaboration, professional learning, student advising, equitable access, implementation monitoring, and schoolwide coherence.
- **Teachers and instructional teams** may use it to think about academic integration, experiential learning, student reflection, project quality, standards alignment, and classroom-level implementation.
- **Counselors, advisors, and student support teams** may use it to think about reflection routines, pathway guidance, transition planning, family communication, and supports that help all students access opportunities.
- **Pathway, career and technical education (CTE), workforce, and partnership leaders** may use it to think about pathway quality, employer engagement, credentials, dual credit, internships, work-based learning, and postsecondary alignment.

The Blueprint is designed for schools serving different grade spans. Some readers may work in elementary schools and focus primarily on awareness and early exploration. Others may work in middle schools and focus on identity development and pathway exposure. Others may work in high schools and focus on pathways, credentials, dual credit, and postsecondary transitions. Schools and networks serving multiple grade spans should use the document as a progression rather than a set of disconnected sections.

## How to Use This Blueprint

This Blueprint is designed to be used over a period of time to support planning, implementation, reflection, and refinement of career-connected learning.

Some may read the document from beginning to end to understand the full model. Others may pick and choose specific sections as they work on a particular pillar, grade span, or implementation challenge.

To get the most from the Blueprint, readers may want to

- begin with the introductory sections to understand the overall design logic;
- review the three-pillar overview to see how the model works cohesively as a system;
- read the pillar section(s) most relevant to their current priorities;
- use grade-span sections to locate K–5, 6–8, and 9–12 guidance;
- pay attention to implementation insights and Watch Fors to anticipate common challenges;
- use the system maps and tables to support team discussion;
- return to the document over time as implementation matures; and
- use implementation checks to help teams move from noticing a potential problem to understanding what it may mean.

The document uses several recurring features to support usability.



**Implementation Insights**

highlight lessons that experienced leaders often learn through implementation.



**Watch Fors**

identify early signs that a system may be drifting or may need recalibration.



**What This Might Look Like**

examples help readers picture implementation in practice.



**System Maps**

summarize how each pillar functions across network, school, instructional team, and student levels.

The Blueprint also uses grade-span markers to help readers locate guidance for different developmental stages:

**K–5** sections focus on awareness, curiosity, foundational skills, and early connections between learning and the world of work.

**6–8** sections focus on exploration, identity development, relevance, reflection, and preparation for more informed pathway participation.

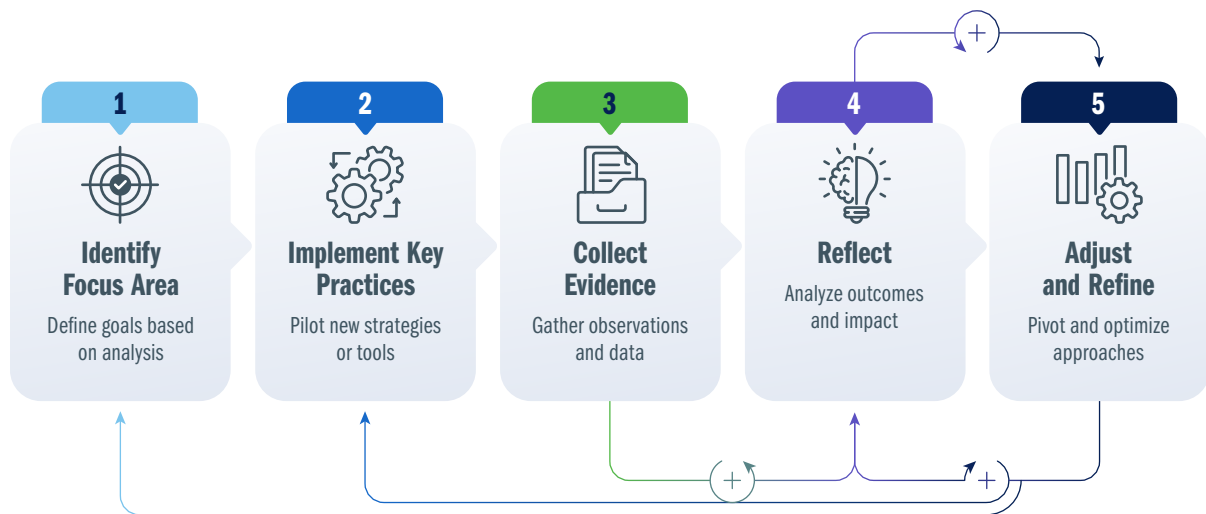
**9–12** sections focus on pathway participation, applied learning, credentials, work-based learning, and postsecondary transition.

The Blueprint is not intended to tell schools to do everything at once. Schools may begin with one pillar, one grade span, one pathway, or one implementation focus area. What matters is that early decisions are coherent and connected to a longer-term vision.

Implementation is developmental for adults too. Schools often move through phases as they build shared understanding, test structures, refine practice, and sustain systems over time.

The simple improvement cycle shown in Figure 1 can guide teams in how to use the Blueprint.

Figure 1. Continuous Improvement Cycle for Using the Blueprint



This cycle applies whether a team is strengthening elementary career awareness, improving professional learning communities (PLCs), designing public exhibitions, refining pathway governance, or expanding work-based learning.

## At a Glance

At a Glance boxes appear at the beginning of each pillar to help readers quickly locate the sections most relevant to their needs. Use them as a navigation guide when you are looking for grade-span guidance, implementation strategies, monitoring tools, common risks, or role-specific responsibilities.

### If you are trying to...

### Start here

**Understand the overall model** —————> [Model at a Glance](#)

**Build career awareness in K–5** —————> [Pillar 1, K–5](#)

**Strengthen pathway selection/advising** —————> [Pillar 1, 6–12](#)

**Improve adult coordination around students** —————> [Pillar 2](#)

**Strengthen project/work-based learning** —————> [Pillar 3](#)

**Assess current implementation** —————> Implementation Checks + System Maps

**Plan next-stage implementation** —————> Implementation Phases

## The Challenge That the CANOPS Model Addresses

Many students move through school with ambition but without enough information, guidance, or structured experience to make informed decisions about their futures. They might know they want to be successful, help their families, attend college, earn a good living, or contribute to their communities. But they may not know about the careers that exist, the education or training different careers require, how school subjects connect to work, or how to navigate the choices in front of them.

This challenge often begins long before high school. Children start forming ideas early about what kinds of work are familiar, what futures seem possible, and whether certain fields feel like they are “for people like me.” Career development scholars have long described childhood and adolescence as periods when young people build self-concept, explore possibilities, and begin connecting their developing sense of self to future work (Porfeli & Lee, 2012; Super, 1957). Gottfredson’s theory of circumscription and compromise also suggests that children might begin ruling out options early based on social messages about gender, status, or belonging, which makes broad exposure especially important in the elementary and middle grades (Gottfredson, 1996).

By middle school, this challenge becomes more urgent. Students are developing stronger identities, interests, preferences, and assumptions about their own abilities. At the same time, many are beginning to make choices about courses, programs, or pathways that could shape later opportunities. Research and policy guidance increasingly identify the middle grades as a critical window for career exploration, especially when students have opportunities to build self-awareness, learn about careers, connect academic learning to real-world problems, and reflect with adults on what they are discovering (ACTE, 2018; Education Strategy Group & American Student Assistance, 2024).

Schools also face structural challenges that make career-connected learning difficult to implement well. Academic programs might emphasize covering content without enough hands-on application. Career exposure might occur through isolated events rather than a developmental sequence. Student supports might focus on immediate needs without helping students connect those supports to long-term planning. High school pathways might exist without enough early career exploration or advising to help students choose well.

When these aspects of schooling are disconnected, students might experience school as a set of separate requirements rather than a coherent preparation for life after graduation.

The challenge this model addresses can be summarized simply:

*Too many students are asked to make important decisions about their futures before schools have given them enough exposure, application, reflection, and guidance to make those decisions well.*

The CANOPS model responds to this challenge by treating career preparation not as a high school add-on, but as a K–12 developmental system. Students begin with awareness and career language in the elementary grades, deepen exploration and identity development in the middle grades, and move into pathways, credentials, work-based learning, and postsecondary planning in high school.

## What Career-Connected School Design Means Across K–12

Career academies have traditionally been associated with high school programs that organize learning around career themes or pathways while maintaining rigorous academic expectations. High-quality career academies often include career-themed coursework, employer partnerships, work-based learning, academic and technical integration, and support for postsecondary planning.

Those features remain important, especially in grades 9–12. But a K–12 career-connected model asks schools to think more developmentally.

The K–12 career-connected school design is built on a simple idea: Students need different kinds of experiences at different developmental stages. Children in K–5 need exposure, language, curiosity, and early connections between learning and the world around them. Middle school students need exploration, identity development, relevance, and guided reflection. High school students need pathways, applied experiences, credentials, work-based learning, and transition planning (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Progression of Developmental Focus Across Grade Spans**

| Grade Span | Developmental Focus | What Students Need                              | Research Rationale                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| K–5        | Awareness           | Exposure, language, curiosity, early reflection | Career development research suggests that children begin forming ideas about work, identity, and possible futures early. Early exposure can broaden students' sense of what is possible and counter narrow assumptions about who belongs in certain careers. |

| Grade Span                      | Developmental Focus | What Students Need                                              | Research Rationale                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6–8                             | Exploration         | Identity development, options, relevance, guided reflection     | Middle school is a key period for identity development. Students are beginning to ask who they are, what they are good at, and which futures feel possible. Career exploration at this stage helps students try on possibilities before eliminating options too early.                             |
| 9–12                            | Preparation         | Pathways, applied experiences, credentials, transition planning | High school students benefit from more concrete experiences that connect coursework, credentials, workplace exposure, and postsecondary planning. Research on career readiness links teenage career exploration, workplace experiences, and future planning with better adult employment outcomes. |
| <b>Postsecondary Transition</b> | Next steps          | Adaptability, continued learning                                | The goal is not a fixed career decision at graduation. It is readiness to navigate transitions, continue learning, and adjust plans as opportunities and interests evolve.                                                                                                                         |

- In **elementary school**, career-connected learning does not mean asking young children to choose a career. It means helping students build curiosity, language, confidence, and awareness. Students begin to learn that adults solve problems, use tools, help communities, create products, analyze information, communicate ideas, and continue learning throughout their lives. Career awareness becomes a way to connect academic learning to the world around them.
- In **middle school**, career-connected learning becomes more exploratory and reflective. Students are developing identity and beginning to notice their own interests, strengths, motivations, and preferred ways of working. This is a powerful time to help students explore options before they narrow them. Middle school experiences should help students ask better questions about themselves and their futures, not pressure them into fixed decisions too early.

- In **high school**, career-connected learning becomes more concrete. Students participate in pathways, advanced coursework, dual credit, credentials, internships, work-based learning, capstones, and transition planning. The goal is not narrow job training. The goal is dual readiness: Students should leave high school with academic preparation, technical and transferable skills, clearer postsecondary options, and confidence navigating future transitions.

A K–12 career-connected model can therefore be understood as a developmental continuum (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. College and Career Readiness Continuum, Kindergarten to Postsecondary**



The K–12 career academy model works best when schools view these stages as connected. Elementary school awareness creates language and curiosity. Middle school exploration helps students build identity and informed interest. High school pathways give students opportunities to apply learning, earn meaningful credentials, and prepare for next steps.

A nuanced progression matters because students rarely make strong decisions from a single event, interest survey, or pathway fair. They need repeated opportunities to explore, apply, reflect, revise, and plan with adult support over time.

The Blueprint is designed to help schools respond to that challenge through coherent implementation across three connected pillars that are found in the CANOPS model:

- College and Career Readiness
- Professional Learning Communities
- Experiential Learning

Together, these three pillars help schools connect academic learning, adult collaboration, student support, career exploration, and real-world application for a more purposeful K–12 experience.

## What the Research Tells Us About Quality

Career academies have been part of American education for decades. They have been implemented in a variety of forms, including school-within-a-school models, magnet programs, wall-to-wall academies, and full school designs organized around career pathways. Across these variations, high-quality career academies typically combine rigorous academics, career-related coursework, smaller learning environments, student supports, and partnerships with employers or community organizations to help students connect school learning to postsecondary and workforce opportunities (Stern et al., 2000; What Works Clearinghouse, 2015).

Research suggests that career academies can produce meaningful benefits when they are implemented with quality and coherence. The What Works Clearinghouse found that career academies had potentially positive effects on school completion for high-school-aged students at risk of dropping out (What Works Clearinghouse, 2015). A long-term random assignment evaluation by MDRC found sustained labor market gains for career academy participants, including higher average monthly earnings, hours worked, and hourly wages over the eight years following students' expected graduation (Kemple & Willner, 2008).

Research on career readiness more broadly reinforces the importance of giving students structured opportunities to explore careers, reflect on their interests, and experience workplaces before making major postsecondary decisions. Research conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that young people thinking about their futures, exploring careers, and experiencing workplaces is associated with better-than-expected employment outcomes in adulthood. The same OECD research also found that variation in career readiness is strongly associated with disadvantages, underscoring the importance of schools systematically addressing unequal access to career information, guidance, and experiences (Mann et al., 2020).

The lesson from this research is not that schools should simply add career-themed courses, credentials, or pathways. It is that outcomes depend on intentional design sustained over time. Career academies are strongest when academic learning, career themes, employer and postsecondary partnerships, student supports, work-based learning, and teacher collaboration function as connected parts of a coherent school model rather than as isolated programs (Kemple, 2001; National Career Academy Coalition, n.d.; Stern et al., 2010).

High-quality career academies and career-connected schools typically include

- rigorous academic instruction connected to real-world application;
- career themes or pathways connected to meaningful postsecondary and workforce opportunities;
- partnerships with employers, higher education institutions, and community organizations;
- work-based or experiential learning;
- structured student support and advising;
- teacher collaboration around student needs; and
- ongoing attention to implementation quality.

These features are consistent with the National Career Academy Coalition's National Standards of Practice, which emphasize a defined mission and goals, academy structure, host district and high school support, faculty and staff collaboration, professional development, curriculum and instruction, employer and community partnerships, and ongoing assessment and improvement (National Career Academy Coalition, n.d.).

## Implementation Architecture: How the Model Comes to Life

Effective career-connected school design is not implemented through just one program or initiative. It emerges when multiple parts of a school system work together toward a shared design.

Implementation happens across multiple levels (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Implementation Levels of Career-Connected School Design**

| Implementation Level                    | Who Is Involved                                            | Focus of Work                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Network / District</b>               | District leaders, charter network staff, pathway directors | Vision, partnerships, policies, resource alignment               |
| <b>School Leadership</b>                | Principals, assistant principals, leadership teams         | School structures, scheduling, staffing, coordination            |
| <b>Classroom and Student Experience</b> | Teachers, counselors, pathway teams                        | Instructional practices, student advising, experiential learning |

The levels summarized in Table 2 are connected. Network or district leaders create conditions for implementation. School leaders translate those conditions into structures and routines. Teachers, counselors, and pathway teams bring the model to life through instruction and student experience.

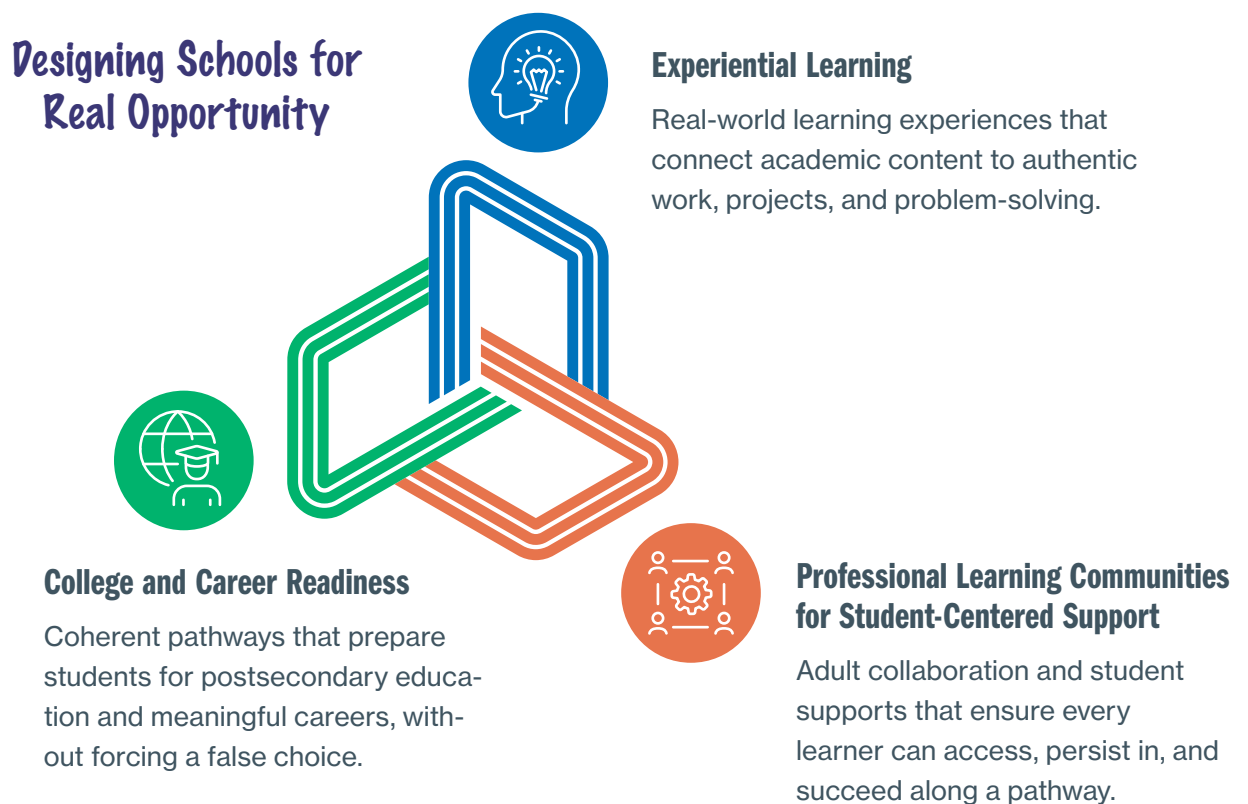
When these levels are aligned, students experience a coherent journey in which academic learning, career exploration, adult support, and real-world application reinforce one another. When they are not aligned, career-connected learning can become a collection of disconnected activities.

Distributed leadership is essential. Career-connected school design cannot depend on one enthusiastic champion. Sustainable implementation requires shared ownership across system leaders, school leaders, teachers, counselors, support staff, students, families, and community partners.

## The Three Pillars of the CANOPS Model

The CANOPS model is organized around three connected pillars. Each pillar serves a distinct function, but the strength of the model comes from how the pillars work together across the K–12 student experience.

Figure 3: The Three Pillars of the CANOPS Model



In the CANOPS model, College and Career Readiness helps students build direction and informed choice. Professional Learning Communities for Student-Centered Support help adults coordinate instruction, support, and continuous improvement. Experiential Learning gives students meaningful opportunities to apply academic learning in authentic contexts and demonstrate what they know.

A school may choose to begin with one pillar, but the long-term strength of the model comes from how the pillars reinforce one another. Career readiness becomes more meaningful when students experience applied learning. Experiential learning becomes stronger when adults collaborate through PLCs. PLCs become more purposeful when they are focused on the full student experience, rather than only on isolated academic data.

The following sections describe each pillar in depth. Each description includes design principles, implementation guidance, grade-span considerations, enabling conditions, common risks, and indicators of implementation health.

## Pillar 1: At a Glance

### Looking for...

K–5, 6–8, or 9–12 guidance?

→ [Developmental Progression Across Grade Bands](#)

How to build the system?

→ [How the Pillar Operates](#)

What conditions need to be in place?

→ [What Supports the Pillar](#)

How to know whether implementation is healthy?

→ [How the Pillar Improves Over Time](#)

What to watch for?

→ [Implementation Check](#)

Who owns what?

→ [System Map](#)

### Start here

## Pillar 1: College and Career Readiness

The Developmental System for Informed Choice and Future Readiness

### Understanding the Pillar

#### Pillar Overview

The College and Career Readiness pillar focuses on implementing a developmental system that helps students build awareness, confidence, academic skill, career understanding, and informed choice over time.

When this pillar is implemented effectively, students are not asked to choose between being college ready or career ready. They need both. Students need rigorous academic preparation; technical and career-connected skills; opportunities to explore real work; and structured support to understand how their interests, strengths, and learning connect to future possibilities.

#### Why College and Career Readiness Must Begin Early

This pillar helps schools move from

*career pathways as a set of  
high school programs*

to

*college and career readiness as a  
coherent K–12 learning journey.*

That distinction matters.

When career preparation begins too late, students may select pathways based on limited exposure, peer influence, scheduling convenience, or incomplete understanding of what careers and postsecondary options actually require. When preparation begins early and is developed intentionally across grade levels, students are more likely to make decisions based on experience, reflection, adult guidance, academic understanding, and awareness of future opportunity.

The goal is not early specialization or tracking. The goal is *informed choice*.

College and career readiness is not owned only by counselors, pathway teachers, or CTE staff. It requires shared responsibility across network leaders, school leaders, teachers, advisors, families, employers, postsecondary partners, and community organizations.

A developmental approach helps prevent these problems by giving students repeated opportunities to explore, reflect, and revise their thinking over time.

In the elementary grades, students build curiosity and career language. In the middle grades, students begin connecting interests, strengths, and identity to possible futures. In high school, students apply learning through pathways, credentials, dual credit, work-based learning, and transition planning.

This progression helps students understand that future readiness is not a single decision. It is a series of experiences that helps them learn who they are, what they are good at, what they care about, and which opportunities are available to them.



## Implementation Insight

**Pathways are the outcome of a college and career readiness system, not the starting point.**

Schools often focus first on which pathways to offer. That matters, but it is not enough. Students also need a college and career readiness system that provides them with opportunities for exposure, reflection, advising, family communication, academic integration, and adult guidance to help them make sense of the pathway options.

***Without that system, pathway choice can become a scheduling event instead of a readiness milestone.***

Table 3 clarifies the difference between a fully developed college and career readiness system and a narrower approach that focuses only on visible pathway structures.

**Table 3. What High-Quality College and Career Readiness Is and Is Not**

| <b>College and Career Readiness Is...</b>                            | <b>College and Career Readiness Is Not...</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <b>A K–12 developmental progression</b>                              | A high school-only initiative                 |
| <b>Preparation for both college and career</b>                       | A choice between college or career            |
| <b>Built through exposure, reflection, advising, and application</b> | A one-time pathway selection process          |
| <b>Connected to academic instruction</b>                             | Separate from core learning                   |
| <b>Supported by adults across the system</b>                         | Owned only by counselors or pathway staff     |
| <b>Informed by labor market data and student interest</b>            | Built only around popularity or convenience   |
| <b>Flexible and developmental</b>                                    | Early tracking into fixed career identities   |
| <b>Continuously reviewed and refined</b>                             | Static once pathways are launched             |

The distinctions summarized in Table 3 matter because schools can unintentionally adopt the visible structures of career pathways without building the developmental supports students need to navigate those pathways successfully. A school may offer pathways, courses, projects, or career-themed experiences, but students may lack the guidance, reflection, and academic connections needed to understand what those opportunities mean for their futures.

In a poorly developed college and career readiness system:

- pathways may exist without strong advising;
- students may complete projects without meaningful reflection;
- career exploration may occur during isolated events only;
- pathway participation may not connect clearly to postsecondary opportunities; and
- students may struggle to explain why they selected a pathway or what they are learning from it.

Strong implementation requires schools to ask not only, **“What pathways do we offer?”** but also, **“How are students being prepared to understand, access, persist in, and benefit from those pathways?”**

## Developmental Progression Across Grade Bands

Strong college and career readiness systems evolve as students develop. The goals, structures, and supports should become increasingly sophisticated across grade levels while maintaining a coherent progression over time.

The developmental progression is important because informed choice requires repeated exposure, reflection, application, and adult guidance, not a single decision point in high school.

## K–5: Awareness, Curiosity, and Career Language



In the elementary grades, the goal is not specialization or pathway selection. The goal is helping students

- build curiosity about the world of work,
- develop awareness of different roles and industries,
- connect learning to real-life application,
- begin identifying interests and strengths, and
- see themselves as capable learners and future contributors.

At this stage, students benefit from broad exposure to a wide range of careers, industries, and community roles.

One approach that schools may consider is using a shared career interest framework, such as RIASEC (Realistic Investigative Artistic Social Enterprising Conventional), to ensure students experience a balanced range of career types. The RIASEC framework organizes interests and work activities into six broad areas:

- **Realistic**—Building, fixing, working with tools or materials
- **Investigative**—Researching, analyzing, questioning, solving complex problems
- **Artistic**—Creating, designing, expressing ideas
- **Social**—Helping, teaching, supporting, serving others
- **Enterprising**—Leading, persuading, organizing, starting new ventures
- **Conventional**—Organizing, managing information, following systems and procedures

In the CANOPS model, students are introduced to careers connected to all six RIASEC areas across the elementary grades. For example, kindergarten students may explore careers such as firefighter, doctor, artist, elementary teacher, baker, and farmer. By 5th grade, students may be exploring careers such as horticulturalist, climate change analyst, reporter, photographer, dietitian, cosmetologist, and theme park engineer.

The purpose of a shared career interest framework like RIASEC is not for students to choose careers early, but rather to build language, curiosity, and a broader sense of possibility from an early age.

Elementary implementation of a shared career interest framework might include

- career-connected read-alouds and class-room discussions;
- guest speakers and community visits;
- role-play and simulation activities;
- project-based learning connected to community problems;
- maker activities connected to engineering, design, healthcare, entrepreneurship, or environmental science; and
- classroom reflection routines connected to interests and strengths.

Rather than having students simply memorize job titles, these sorts of frameworks help students begin to understand that careers involve

- solving problems,
- helping people,
- creating ideas,
- communicating,
- designing,
- analyzing,
- building, and
- leading.

One important implementation consideration is ensuring that career awareness becomes embedded into instruction rather than functioning as an occasional event or career day. For example:

- **mathematics** instruction may include content related to architecture, engineering, construction, measurement, or financial literacy connections;
- **literacy** instruction may incorporate careers connected to communication, journalism, technical writing, storytelling, or public service;
- **science** investigations may connect to healthcare, environmental science, agriculture, or technology; and
- collaborative projects may introduce leadership, design, entrepreneurship, or community planning concepts.

Elementary students also benefit from recurring opportunities to reflect on

- what they enjoy,
- what they are curious about,
- how they contribute to teams,
- what kinds of problems interest them, and
- which skills they are developing.

These early reflection routines help establish the self-awareness students will build on later.



## What This Might Look Like

### Grade 4 Community Garden Project

A 4th grade team designs a community garden project connected to science, mathematics, and writing standards.

Students research plant growth, calculate space and materials, interview local gardeners, and present design ideas to families and community volunteers. Throughout the project, teachers help students identify careers connected to environmental science, construction, design, nutrition, and community planning.

Students complete simple reflection prompts such as

- Which part of this project interested you most?
- Which role did you enjoy during teamwork?
- What kinds of adults do similar work?
- Which skills did you use that might matter outside of school?

The goal of this sort of project is not to have students select a career, but to help them connect learning, interests, and real-world contribution.

## 6–8: Exploration, Identity, and Informed Interest



In the middle grades, career readiness becomes more exploratory and reflective.

Students are increasingly ready to

- investigate industries and pathways in greater depth;
- explore emerging interests and strengths;
- connect academic skills to future opportunities;
- reflect on identity, motivation, and goals; and
- understand how different pathways connect to postsecondary options.

Middle school implementation should help students move beyond exposure toward informed exploration.

This might include

- interdisciplinary projects connected to career themes,
- pathway exploration courses,
- career interest inventories and reflection journals,
- job shadowing or workplace visits,

- student exhibitions connected to community issues,
- advisory discussions focused on strengths and future planning, and
- exploratory electives tied to high-demand sectors.

One important lesson across many implementation efforts is that middle school students often need help interpreting their experiences. Exposure alone does not automatically lead to self-awareness or informed planning.

Students benefit from recurring opportunities to ask questions like the following:

- What kinds of work feel meaningful to me?
- What environments help me succeed?
- Which skills am I developing?
- Which roles do I naturally take during collaboration?
- What kinds of problems interest me most?

In CANOPS, students use digital RIASEC journals beginning in the upper elementary and middle grades to document evolving interests, reflect on experiences, and identify patterns over time. Other schools may use different tools, but the key design principle is the same: Students need a recurring structure for making meaning from career-connected experiences.

Middle school teams should also carefully monitor whether pathway exploration remains broad and inclusive. Schools can unintentionally narrow student thinking too early when students begin associating certain pathways with specific peer groups, achievement levels, gender stereotypes, or perceived academic identities.



## Implementation Insight

Many schools underestimate how much advising and reflection infrastructure students need during the middle grades.

Without structured opportunities to process experiences with trusted adults, career exploration can become fragmented or superficial. Students may participate in projects and exploratory activities without ever connecting those experiences to interests, strengths, identity, postsecondary possibilities, or future planning.

Strong systems build recurring reflection and advising into the student experience, not just isolated career activities.

## 9–12: Pathway Participation, Postsecondary Readiness, and Transition Planning



In high school, students begin applying earlier exploration through pathway participation, advanced coursework, dual credit, credentials, work-based learning, and transition planning.

At this stage, students should experience pathways as coherent learning journeys that are

- connected to both academic and technical skill development,
- aligned with postsecondary opportunity, and
- supported by advising and adult mentorship.

Strong implementation helps students understand how pathway coursework, core academics, transferable skills, credentials, internships, and postsecondary planning all connect to future readiness.

This might include

- students completing industry-connected projects,
- pathway-aligned internships or clinical experiences,
- dual enrollment opportunities connected to pathway fields,
- student portfolios and capstone presentations,
- industry certifications,
- pathway advisory boards,
- structured transition planning conferences, and
- college and career advising cycles.

In CANOPS, high school students choose two pathways to explore rather than being locked into a single specialization too early. Pathways include fields such as agriculture, criminal justice, cybersecurity and information assurance, education, engineering, exercise science, healthcare, marketing and sales, precision machining, social and community service, and welding.

Each pathway can provide opportunities for dual credit, industry certifications, internships, job shadowing, employer-sponsored projects, or work-based learning. In some cases, core academic requirements may be met within pathway coursework. For example, a biomedical pathway may include biology or health science coursework that supports both graduation requirements and pathway preparation.

One important implementation consideration is ensuring that pathways remain rigorous and opportunity-connected rather than becoming isolated elective sequences.

Students should experience pathways as preparation for

- postsecondary education,
- long-term adaptability, and
- living-wage careers,
- continued learning,

not as narrow job training disconnected from broader academic and life readiness.

Strong systems also help students understand that pathways are not permanent identities. Students should graduate with technical skills, transferable skills, self-awareness, postsecondary options, and the confidence to navigate future transitions, not the feeling that they are locked into a single future outcome.



## Watch For

Career pathway systems may need recalibration if

- pathways function independently from core academics;
- advising systems focus on scheduling rather than future planning;
- pathway rigor varies significantly across programs;
- students cannot explain how pathway experiences connect to future goals;
- students select pathways based primarily on peer influence or scheduling;
- pathway participation is inequitable across student groups; or
- pathways lack meaningful work-based learning or postsecondary alignment;
- pathway expansion outpaces staffing or partner capacity.

These signs often indicate that the system is offering pathway access without fully supporting pathway quality or informed student participation.

## How the Pillar Operates

### Building a Coherent College and Career Readiness System

Strong college and career readiness systems do not rely on a single program, course sequence, or pathway fair. They are built through coordinated structures that help students continuously connect academic learning, career awareness, self-reflection, advising, pathway exploration, postsecondary planning, and real-world application over time.

This section focuses on the structures, routines, and adult practices that help schools move from isolated career activities toward a coherent developmental system.

## **Career Awareness and Exploration Structures**

Career exploration works best when it is

- recurring,
- developmental,
- integrated into instruction,
- supported by reflection, and
- reinforced by adults across the system,

rather than treated as an occasional event.

Strong implementation often includes

- recurring career-connected learning experiences,
- structured advisory routines,
- pathway exploration opportunities,
- interdisciplinary projects,
- student reflection tools,
- exposure to multiple industries and roles, and
- opportunities for students to revisit and refine interests over time.

Students benefit from seeing career exploration as an ongoing process of learning about themselves and the world, rather than as choosing a future career as early as possible.

Schools may organize these structures differently depending on grade span, staffing, and scheduling flexibility. What matters most is that students experience repeated opportunities to explore, reflect, connect, revise, and plan throughout their K–12 journey.



## **Implementation Insight**

Before they can make informed pathway decisions, students often need significantly more exposure than adults expect.

One-time career interest surveys or isolated pathway fairs rarely provide enough context for meaningful decision-making. Strong systems give students multiple opportunities across several years to experience different fields, to interact with adults and peers, to apply skills in authentic settings, to reflect on interests and strengths, and to revisit earlier assumptions.

This repeated exposure helps students make choices based on experience rather than on stereotypes, peer influence, or incomplete information.

## **Reflection and Advising Systems**

Advising is one of the most important, and most underestimated, parts of career-connected school design.

Exposure alone does not help students interpret strengths, interests, motivations, future goals, or postsecondary possibilities. Students need structured opportunities to process experiences with trusted adults over time.

Strong systems often include

- advisory periods,
- student reflection journals,
- career interest inventories,
- student-led conferences,
- portfolio reviews,
- pathway planning conversations,
- goal-setting routines, and
- transition planning meetings.

The purpose of these structures is not simply to help students choose a pathway. It is to help students

- build self-awareness,
- recognize patterns in their interests and strengths,
- connect experiences across classes and projects,
- understand how opportunities connect to future options, and
- develop confidence in making decisions over time.

One thing that leaders should carefully consider is who owns advising responsibilities within the system.

Strong implementation typically requires making advising a shared responsibility across counselors, teachers, pathway instructors, advisory staff, administrators, and families rather than resting entirely on counseling departments alone.



## What This Might Look Like

### **Advisory Conference Before Pathway Selection**

Before pathway exploration conferences, an 8th grade advisory team reviews student reflection journals to identify patterns in students' interests, strengths, and questions.

Students prepare short presentations describing

- projects they found most engaging,
- skills they believe they are developing,
- collaborative roles they tend to take,
- pathways or industries they want to explore further, and
- questions they still have about future opportunities.

Advisors use these reflections to guide conversations with students and families about high school course selection and pathway exploration. Rather than steering students toward a “correct” pathway, adults help students interpret patterns emerging across multiple experiences over time.

### **Academic Integration**

College and career readiness should not live only in pathway or elective courses.

Strong systems help students see how mathematics, literacy, science, social studies, communication, and problem-solving connect to real-world application and future opportunities across all classrooms.

This does not require every lesson to include an explicit career connection. However, students benefit when teachers regularly help them understand

- how academic skills transfer beyond school,
- how different industries use those skills, and
- how learning connects to authentic problems and applications.

For example:

- **mathematics** teachers may connect statistics to healthcare, finance, engineering, or data science.
- **English language arts** teachers may incorporate technical communication, presentations, research, and professional writing.
- **science** teachers may connect investigations to healthcare, environmental science, manufacturing, or agriculture.
- **social studies** teachers may explore public policy, entrepreneurship, community systems, or civic leadership.

One important implementation challenge is avoiding superficial career references that feel disconnected from instruction.

Students quickly recognize when career connections feel artificial or forced. Strong implementation requires adults to thoughtfully integrate application and relevance into instruction rather than adding isolated “career moments.”

Schools may also need collaborative planning structures that enable academic teachers, pathway instructors, counselors, and experiential learning teams to coordinate expectations and reinforce transferable skills consistently across classrooms.



## Watch For

Career-connected learning may be drifting toward fragmentation when

- career exploration happens primarily during special events,
- pathway learning operates separately from core academics,
- students experience inconsistent messaging across adults,
- advisory structures focus mostly on scheduling,
- reflection routines disappear during busy periods,
- students cannot explain how academic learning connects to future opportunities, or
- only pathway teachers discuss career readiness or transferable skills.

These are often signs that career preparation is happening in separate, disconnected pieces rather than being built into instruction, advising, and student support across the school.

### Pathway Design and Governance

High-quality pathways require disciplined design and ongoing governance.

A common design flaw is launching pathways based on the wrong reasons, for example:

- they are popular,
- funding becomes available,
- equipment has been secured,
- staff have personal interest, or
- peer schools offer them.

Strong systems instead use a more disciplined process that considers a range of factors, including

- labor market demand,
- postsecondary alignment,
- credential value,
- partner depth,
- staffing capacity,
- student interest,
- long-term sustainability, and
- equity of access.

Pathways should connect students to meaningful postsecondary and workforce opportunities, not simply create additional electives.

Strong implementation often includes

- labor market analysis,
- advisory boards with industry and postsecondary partners,
- regular pathway review cycles,
- clearly defined pathway outcomes,
- sustainability planning before expansion, and
- documented criteria for adding, refining, or sunseting pathways.

Leaders should also recognize that pathway expansion creates operational complexity. Each new pathway may require staffing expertise, equipment and materials, scheduling coordination, partnership development, internship opportunities, credential alignment, dual credit agreements, and student support systems.

### **Core Leadership Tension: Choice With Guardrails**

One of the most important leadership decisions is how to balance student choice with system coherence and pathway quality.

Too little choice can limit student agency and reduce relevance. Too much choice, especially without sufficient exposure or advising, can overwhelm students and dilute pathway quality. Strong systems provide “choice with guardrails,” which includes

- broad early exploration,
- structured advising,
- repeated reflection opportunities,
- meaningful but manageable pathway options, and
- clear postsecondary connections.

Leaders should carefully consider the following questions when thinking of how many pathway choices to offer students:

- How much exposure do students need before selecting pathways?
- Which pathways can the school realistically sustain with quality?
- How will families understand pathway opportunities and implications?
- Which advising structures help students make informed decisions?
- How will the school monitor whether pathway choices remain equitable and opportunity-connected?
- How will pathway quality be reviewed and refined over time?

The goal is not to offer every possible pathway. The goal is to offer coherent, high-quality opportunities students can meaningfully navigate and understand. In many cases, fewer coherent, well-supported pathways produce stronger student experiences than large numbers of disconnected offerings.

One important leadership tension is balancing student choice with pathway quality and sustainability.



## Implementation Insight

Strong pathways are usually built through depth, not volume.

Schools sometimes feel pressure to continuously add pathways to increase student choice. However, pathways without strong staffing, partner alignment, advising, and postsecondary connections often struggle to sustain quality over time.

Students benefit more from pathways that offer authentic application, strong adult support, meaningful credentials, postsecondary connection, work-based learning, and coherent sequencing than from large numbers of loosely developed options.

### What Supports the Pillar

#### Conditions That Make College and Career Readiness Work

College and career readiness requires more than good intentions or strong individual programs. It depends on system conditions that help students experience career development as coherent, supported, and connected across grade levels.

#### Leadership and Staffing Structures

Strong implementation requires clarity about who owns different parts of the system.

Depending on school size and context, this may include

- network or district leaders responsible for pathway strategy and alignment;
- school leaders responsible for schedules, staffing, advising, and coherence;
- counselors or advisors responsible for student planning and reflection;
- pathway teachers responsible for pathway coursework and applied learning;
- core academic teachers responsible for integrating career relevance into instruction;
- work-based learning coordinators responsible for employer connections and placements; and
- data or operations staff responsible for tracking participation, persistence, credits, credentials, and outcomes.

A common implementation risk is assuming career preparation can be managed informally by a few passionate staff members. That may work in early implementation, but it becomes difficult to sustain as pathways grow, partnerships expand, and student needs become more complex.

To ensure that planning and implementation duties are distributed appropriately across staff, leaders should clarify the following:

- Who coordinates pathway planning?
- Who monitors advising quality?
- Who tracks student participation and access?
- Who manages partner relationships?
- Who reviews labor market alignment?
- Who ensures academic and pathway integration?
- Who communicates with families?

Without clear ownership, implementation often becomes personality-dependent and vulnerable to staff turnover.

### **Scheduling and Operational Conditions**

College and career readiness must be supported by the school schedule.

Implementation may require time for

- advising or reflection,
- pathway exploration,
- interdisciplinary planning,
- student conferences,
- family meetings,
- work-based learning,
- dual credit coursework,
- internship coordination,
- capstone or portfolio development, and
- partner engagement.

Schools should consider how the master schedule supports or constrains pathway quality:

- Are students able to access both rigorous academics and pathway coursework?
- Do teachers have planning time to coordinate academic and pathway connections?
- Do students have time to reflect on experiences and revise plans?
- Can work-based learning fit within the school day or week?
- Are dual credit courses scheduled in ways that support access?
- Does the schedule unintentionally prevent some students from participating?

Scheduling is often where the model succeeds or breaks down. Leaders may have strong pathway designs on paper, but if the schedule does not support student access, adult collaboration, and advising time, implementation will remain uneven.

### **Professional Learning and Capacity Building**

Educators need support to implement college and career readiness well.

Professional learning may need to address

- the developmental progression of career exploration,
- the use of career interest tools such as RIASEC,
- advising and reflection routines,
- the integration of career connections into academic instruction,
- pathway design and labor market alignment,
- support for students in decision-making without premature tracking,
- family communication about pathways and postsecondary options, and
- equity monitoring across pathways and advanced opportunities.

One-time training is rarely enough. Adults need ongoing opportunities to practice, reflect, review student evidence, and calibrate expectations.

For example, teachers may need support learning how to make career connections feel authentic rather than forced. Advisors may need support facilitating student reflection. School leaders may need support interpreting pathway participation data and making governance decisions.

Professional learning should help adults understand not only what to do, but also why it matters.

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURES

Families play an important role in helping students interpret pathway options and future opportunities.

### **Strong implementation includes intentional family communication around**

- pathway structures,
- graduation requirements,
- credential opportunities,
- dual credit,
- internships and work-based learning,
- postsecondary options,
- labor market trends, and
- advising and planning processes.

### **Schools often discover that families need support understanding**

- how pathways connect to college readiness,
- how pathway flexibility works,
- what credentials mean,
- how students can change direction over time, and
- how pathways support long-term opportunity.

Community and industry partnerships are also essential for sustaining authentic pathway experiences.

### **Partnerships may support**

- guest speakers,
- mentorships,
- internships,
- advisory boards,
- industry projects,
- equipment and resource support,
- curriculum feedback, and
- postsecondary transitions.

Strong systems move beyond one-time guest experiences and build recurring relationships that deepen authenticity and opportunity over time.

## ACCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

College and career readiness must be designed for all students, not only for those who already know what they want to do or who already appear academically successful.

Strong implementation requires leaders to monitor access to

- career exploration,
- advising,
- pathway coursework,
- advanced academics,
- dual credit,
- credentials,
- internships,
- work-based learning,
- transportation-supported opportunities, and
- family-facing information.

Schools should regularly examine whether certain students are being steered away from particular pathways, are being excluded from advanced opportunities, or are receiving less robust advising.

Students with disabilities, English Learner (EL) students, first-generation college-going students, students from families with low income, and students who are still developing academic confidence may need additional support to access the full range of opportunities.

Support might include

- scaffolded advising conversations;
- multilingual family communication;
- accommodations for work-based learning;
- transportation planning;
- flexible scheduling;
- collaboration among pathway teachers, counselors, English Learner staff, and special education staff; and
- active monitoring of who participates in advanced courses, credentials, and internships.

The goal is not just pathway access. The goal is meaningful participation and successful completion.

## How the Pillar Improves Over Time

### Monitoring, Refining, and Sustaining the System

Strong college and career readiness systems are not static. They require ongoing review, refinement, and adjustment as labor market needs, staffing capacity, partnership opportunities, and students' interests evolve.

### Indicators of Implementation Health

Schools should monitor multiple types of indicators to understand whether college and career readiness is working as intended. These indicators can help leaders see whether students are experiencing a coherent developmental system or a collection of disconnected activities.

#### Student Experience Indicators

- Students participate in career exposure activities.
- Students complete reflection journals or portfolios.
- Students engage meaningfully in pathway exploration.
- Students persist in selected pathways over time.
- Students can explain why they selected a pathway.
- Students express confidence in their postsecondary planning.

#### Adult Practice Indicators

- Teachers integrate career connections into instruction.
- Advisors use reflection tools to guide student planning.
- Teachers and counselors review student interests over time.
- Families receive clear pathway information.
- Staff monitor equity of access and participation.
- Adults coordinate academic and pathway expectations.

#### System Indicators

- Pathways align with labor market and postsecondary opportunities.
- Advisory structures are scheduled and protected.
- Advisory boards meet and inform pathway quality.
- Students have access to dual credit, credentials, and work-based learning.
- Pathways are reviewed, refined, or sunsetted based on evidence.
- Data systems track participation, completion, and outcomes.

Together, these indicators help leaders determine whether the system is helping students build awareness, make informed choices, access meaningful opportunities, and prepare for life after graduation.

### Implementation Check: What to Watch For

Use these signals as prompts for reflection, not as a compliance checklist. A signal does not necessarily mean the pillar is failing; it identifies a place where teams may need to investigate, strengthen a structure, or adjust implementation.

## Pillar 1 Implementation Check: College and Career Readiness

| What to watch for                                                     | What it may signal                                                                                              | What to do next                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pathways are being added faster than the school can sustain them      | Expansion is outpacing staffing, partnerships, scheduling, advising, or other capacity                          | Pause expansion and review current pathway quality, capacity, and sustainability before adding more                |
| Advising is mostly about schedules and course selection               | Students may be making pathway choices without enough exposure, reflection, or guidance                         | Strengthen advising routines, reflection, and pathway-planning conversations                                       |
| Career exposure happens mainly through career days or isolated events | Career readiness is not yet embedded across the student experience                                              | Build recurring exposure and reflection into instruction, advising, projects, and grade-level experiences          |
| Academic teachers do not see career preparation as part of their role | Career-connected learning may be operating separately from core academics                                       | Create planning and professional learning that helps teachers make authentic academic-to-career connections        |
| Families receive information late or find it difficult to understand  | Families may not be able to help students navigate pathways, credentials, dual credit, or postsecondary options | Simplify and begin family communication earlier; create recurring opportunities for families to understand options |
| Access or participation differs substantially across student groups   | Some students may be missing higher-value pathways or advanced opportunities                                    | Review access, participation, persistence, and completion patterns; identify and remove barriers                   |
| Credentials do not have clear postsecondary or labor-market value     | Students may be accumulating credentials without meaningful future benefit                                      | Review credential value with employers, postsecondary partners, and current labor-market information               |

| What to watch for                                                    | What it may signal                                                                             | What to do next                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Partners are used mainly as guest speakers                           | Partnerships may be visible but not yet contributing to pathway quality or student opportunity | Develop deeper roles for partners in projects, advising, work-based learning, pathway review, and transitions                                          |
| Student reflection is inconsistent or superficial                    | Students may be having experiences without making meaning from them                            | Build recurring reflection routines into advising, projects, portfolios, and pathway decisions                                                         |
| Pathway review depends on individual staff or informal relationships | Quality may be personality-dependent and vulnerable to turnover                                | Establish clear review criteria, regular data cycles, shared ownership, and explicit decisions about expanding, redesigning, or discontinuing pathways |

### Implementation Phases

College and career readiness develops over time. Schools do not need to implement every element at once, but they do need to build intentionally. Table 4 summarizes the focus areas and leadership priorities related to college and career readiness at each phase of implementing a career academy.

**Table 4. Implementation Phases for Building a College and Career Readiness System**

| Phase                            | Focus                                             | Leadership Priorities                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Early Implementation</b>      | Build shared understanding and initial structures | Define K–12 progression, identify advising routines, map existing career exposure, begin partner conversations           |
| <b>Developing Implementation</b> | Strengthen coherence and consistency              | Align career exploration with instruction, improve reflection structures, monitor pathway participation, engage families |

| Phase                           | Focus                             | Leadership Priorities                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Maturing Implementation</b>  | Deepen quality and sustainability | Review pathway alignment, expand dual credit and credentials, strengthen advisory boards, monitor equity and outcomes         |
| <b>Sustained Implementation</b> | Institutionalize and refine       | Codify pathway governance, formalize review cycles, onboard new staff, sustain partnerships, use outcome data for improvement |

This progression helps leaders avoid trying to do everything at once while still building toward a coherent system.

### **Sustainability and Scaling Considerations**

Sustainability depends on whether college and career readiness becomes embedded in the school's core systems.

Leaders should consider whether college and career readiness is reflected in

- strategic plans,
- school improvement goals,
- master schedules,
- advising systems,
- staffing plans,
- professional learning calendars,
- partnership agreements,
- data review cycles,
- family communication routines, and
- budget decisions.

Scaling should be disciplined. Before expanding pathways to or replicating the model for additional campuses, leaders should ask the following:

- Do we have the staffing capacity to sustain quality?
- Do we have enough partner depth?
- Do students understand and value the current pathway options?
- Are current pathways producing meaningful outcomes?
- Are access and completion patterns equitable?
- Are advising and reflection structures strong enough?
- Can new staff be onboarded effectively?
- Are pathway decisions governed by clear criteria rather than by individual preference?

To develop and expand strong college and career readiness systems, leaders should align quality, capacity, and opportunity.



## System Map: College and Career Readiness System



## Pillar 2: At a Glance

### Looking for...

**What strong PLCs should look like?**

**K–8 or 9–12 guidance?**

**How PLCs should function in practice?**

**What conditions need to be in place?**

**How to know whether implementation is healthy?**

**What to watch for?**

**Who owns what?**

### Start here

→ [What High-Quality PLCs Look Like in a Student-Centered Support System](#)

→ [Grade Span Sections](#)

→ [How the Pillar Operates](#)

→ [What Supports the Pillar](#)

→ [How the Pillar Improves Over Time](#)

→ [Implementation Check](#)

→ [System Map](#)

## Pillar 2: Professional Learning Communities for Student-Centered Success

The Adult Learning Infrastructure Behind Coherent Career-Connected Schools

### Understanding the Pillar: Why Collaborative Adult Learning Matters

#### Pillar Overview

Professional learning communities, or PLCs, are the adult learning that helps CANOPS ensure that students receive timely instruction, support, enrichment, and access to the full career-connected learning experience.

In many schools, PLCs are understood simply as teacher meetings. When implemented effectively, they are much more than that. PLCs are structured, protected collaboration time in which educators examine evidence of student learning and student experience, identify what students need next, coordinate instructional and support responses, and follow up to determine whether those responses worked.

In career-connected schools, PLCs for student-centered success play an especially important role because the student experience is more complex than in standard academic models. In addition to coordinating standards, assessments, and interventions, teachers and leaders are also coordinating projects, pathways, exhibitions, career connections, student reflection, transferable skills, work-based learning, and postsecondary readiness. PLCs create the structure for adult learning and collaboration through which staff make sure students do not fall through the cracks as the pathway opportunities expand.

This pillar helps schools move from

***PLCs as meetings focused mainly  
on logistics or data review***

to

***PLCs as the adult response system  
behind student-centered support.***

That distinction matters. PLCs are most powerful when adults use protected collaboration time to review evidence of student learning and experience, identify what students need next, to coordinate instruction, intervention, enrichment, and advising, and follow up to see whether the response worked. Without that focus and structure, student support can become fragmented. Academic interventions may happen separately from classroom instruction. Support staff may not be part of planning conversations. Pathway teachers and academic teachers may operate in separate lanes. Students may receive inconsistent expectations or uneven access to enrichment, intervention, advising, and applied learning opportunities.

In the CANOPS model, strong PLCs help adults collectively ask:

***What do students need next, and how will we respond together?***

PLCs for student-centered success create the conditions for shared ownership of student learning and student experience.

## THE FOUR GUIDING QUESTIONS

At the center of effective PLC practice for school leaders, educators, and staff are four guiding questions (DuFour et al., 2016):

1. What do we want students to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know if they learned it?
3. What will we do if they already know it?
4. What will we do if they have not learned it?

These questions keep PLCs focused on student learning rather than logistics alone. In the CANOPS model, these questions are not only instructional questions. They are also student support questions. PLCs use them to determine which students need reteaching, scaffolding, language support, accessibility support, behavioral support, additional time, enrichment, advising, or help staying engaged in pathway and experiential learning.

In a career-connected school, the four questions above still apply, but the evidence adults examine expands. Teams may look not only at assessment scores, but also at student work, project products, reflection artifacts, presentation performance, pathway participation, engagement patterns, intervention data, and evidence of transferable skills.

For example, in addition to the four questions above, a PLC in a career-connected school might also ask the following:

- Are students mastering the academic standards connected to this project?
- Can students explain the real-world problem they are trying to solve?
- Are students demonstrating collaboration and communication skills?
- Which students are becoming more engaged during applied learning?
- Which students need additional intervention before the public exhibition?
- How do we know students understand the career or pathway connection?
- What enrichment opportunities are appropriate for students who already demonstrate mastery?

These sorts of deep, student-centered questions are what makes PLCs in a career-connected school different from generic collaborative meetings.



## Implementation Insight

### **Career-connected PLCs study the full student experience, not just assessment results.**

Academic mastery remains essential, but leaders should also help teams examine engagement, project quality, reflection, participation, presentation, pathway persistence, and intervention patterns. These forms of evidence often reveal student strengths and needs that traditional assessments alone may not capture.

### **Why PLCs Matter in Career-Connected Learning**

Career-connected learning increases instructional complexity. In CANOPS, PLCs are where adults translate evidence into a coordinated response for students.

For example, CANOPS teachers are often coordinating a range of instructional approaches and student supports, including

- standards-based instruction,
- interdisciplinary projects,
- pathway coursework,
- public exhibitions,
- student reflection,
- career exploration,
- transferable skill development,
- intervention and enrichment,
- work-based learning, and
- postsecondary readiness.

But these elements do not align automatically.

For example:

- A student may show leadership during applied work, but still need reading or writing support to explain their reasoning.
- A student may be on track academically, but need help with attendance, confidence, or persistence in pathway coursework.
- A group of students may struggle with presentation expectations before a public exhibition.
- English Learners may understand technical content, but need language scaffolds to communicate their process.
- Students with disabilities may need accommodations that preserve rigor while improving access to projects, pathways, and demonstrations of learning.

Students who already show mastery may need enrichment that deepens applied learning rather than simply more work. PLCs help adults make sense of these connections. They give educators time to align expectations, study student learning, refine instruction, coordinate supports, and improve implementation over time.

### What High-Quality PLCs Look Like in a Student-Centered Support System

Strong PLCs are protected adult collaboration structures that help schools respond to student needs in a coordinated way. In the CANOPS model, PLCs are not only about improving instruction. They are also where adults review evidence, identify what students need next, coordinate academic and nonacademic supports, plan enrichment, and follow up to see whether those responses are working.

**Table 5. What High-Quality PLCs Are and Are Not<sup>1</sup>**

| <b>Professional Learning Communities Are...</b>                        | <b>Professional Learning Communities Are Not...</b> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Protected time for collaborative instructional improvement</b>      | General staff meetings                              |
| <b>Focused on evidence of student learning and experience</b>          | A place only for announcements or logistics         |
| <b>Structured around clear questions, protocols, and follow-up</b>     | Open-ended conversations without action             |
| <b>Connected to standards, projects, pathways, and student support</b> | Limited to pacing guides or test scores             |

<sup>1</sup> DuFour et al. (2016).

| Professional Learning Communities Are...             | Professional Learning Communities Are Not...        |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| A system for shared accountability                   | Dependent on individual teacher preference          |
| A structure for intervention and enrichment planning | A place where data are reviewed but nothing changes |
| A way to improve coherence across classrooms         | A compliance activity                               |

Strong PLCs are defined by whether adult collaboration leads to better student learning, stronger student experiences, and more coordinated support. A PLC is working well when adults leave with a clearer understanding of what students need, who will respond, what will happen next, and how the team will know whether the response helped.

### Core Non-Negotiables

To function as the adult response system behind student-centered support, PLCs need clear implementation expectations. The six core non-negotiables below follow the basic cycle of effective PLC work: protect the time, structure the meeting, review evidence, identify student needs, coordinate the response, and follow up.

- 1. Weekly Protected PLC Time:** Teams need dedicated collaboration time built into the schedule. When PLC time is optional, inconsistent, or regularly interrupted, adults lose the shared space needed to coordinate instruction, intervention, enrichment, advising, and student support.
- 2. Clear Meeting Structure:** PLCs should use agendas, documentation, facilitation norms, and agreed-upon protocols so meetings remain focused on student learning and student support. Structure helps teams move from conversation to decisions.
- 3. Evidence of Student Learning and Experiences Reviewed Regularly:** Teams should examine evidence such as assessments, student work, project artifacts, reflection journals, attendance, engagement, intervention data, presentation rubrics, pathway participation, advising notes, and other evidence connected to the current student need.
- 4. Precise Identification of Student Needs:** Teams should identify what students need at a specific level, rather than relying only on broad grade range needs or general impressions. The supports that students need may include academic reteaching, enrichment, language support, accessibility support, behavioral support, advising, project scaffolding, or help staying on track in a pathway.
- 5. Coordinated Adult Response Required:** PLCs must lead to clear changes in adult practice. This may include changes in instruction, intervention, enrichment, advising, grouping, project design, feedback, family communication, student support, or coordination with counselors, special education staff, English Learner staff, interventionists, or other support personnel.
- 6. Follow-Up on Whether the Response Worked:** Teams should return to prior decisions and examine whether the planned response improved student learning, participation, confidence, or access. If the response did not work, the PLC should adjust the plan rather than simply moving on.



## Watch For

PLCs may need recalibration when

- meetings are dominated by logistics,
- teams review data, but do not change instruction,
- student work is rarely examined,
- action steps are vague or unassigned,
- intervention conversations happen outside the PLC structure,
- project quality varies widely across classrooms,
- pathway teachers operate separately from academic teams, or
- students experience inconsistent expectations across classes.

These are signs that PLCs may be happening on the calendar, but are not yet helping adults coordinate the instruction, intervention, enrichment, and support that students need.

### Developmental Role Across Grade Bands

The purpose of PLCs remains consistent across K–12: Adults collaborate to improve student learning. However, the focus of collaboration changes as students develop and as the model becomes more complex across grade spans.

## K–8: Grade-Level PLCs and Developmental Consistency



In elementary and middle grades, PLCs are often organized by grade level or interdisciplinary team. These teams are well positioned to coordinate the full student experience because they see patterns across academic learning, engagement, behavior, reflection, and support needs.

K–8 PLCs often focus on

- standards alignment;
- foundational literacy and numeracy;
- student work analysis;
- intervention and enrichment planning;
- career awareness and exploration integration;
- project planning and reflection routines;
- student engagement patterns; and
- coordination with special education, English Learner, and Title I staff.

In K–5, teams might ask the following:

- Are students building foundational skills consistently across classrooms?
- How are career-connected projects supporting academic vocabulary and background knowledge?
- Which students need additional support before the next project or exhibition?
- Are reflection routines helping students identify interests and strengths?

In 6–8, teams might ask the following:

- Are students seeing meaningful connections across classes?
- Which students are becoming more engaged during applied learning?
- How are students responding to pathway exploration activities?
- Are reflection structures helping students build self-awareness?
- Are interdisciplinary projects maintaining academic rigor?

Strong K–8 PLCs help prevent career-connected learning from becoming isolated activities. They ensure that exposure, exploration, instruction, intervention, and reflection are connected across the grade-level experience.



## What This Might Look Like

### **Seventh Grade PLC Uses Project Evidence to Adjust Support**

A 7th grade PLC reviews student reflection journals, project artifacts, and presentation evidence after an interdisciplinary environmental design project.

Teachers notice that several students who rarely participate in traditional classroom discussion took strong leadership roles during field research and design work. The team also notices that students struggled to explain the reasoning behind their design recommendations during presentations.

As a result, the team decides to

- build in additional structured peer critique,
- add short oral defense practice before the next exhibition,
- provide sentence stems for explaining evidence and reasoning, and
- offer leadership roles to students who showed increased engagement during the project.

The PLC uses reflection artifacts, student work, and presentation evidence—not just assessment scores—to adjust instruction and support.

## 9–12: Content-Area and Pathway-Aligned PLCs



In high school, PLCs often become more specialized. They may be organized by content area, pathway team, grade-level cohort, or interdisciplinary project team. Many schools need more than one collaborative structure because high school implementation involves academic departments, pathway instructors, counselors, work-based learning coordinators, and post-secondary partners.

High school PLCs often focus on

- standards mastery,
- common assessment analysis,
- pathway rigor,
- dual credit readiness,
- certification preparation,
- project and exhibition quality,
- student persistence and attendance,
- internship or work-based learning readiness,
- postsecondary planning indicators, and
- intervention and enrichment aligned with pathway participation.

High school teams might ask the following:

- Are students demonstrating readiness for dual credit or certification assessments?
- Are pathway projects aligned with academic standards and industry expectations?
- Which students are falling behind in pathway completion?
- Which students need academic support to remain on track for credentials?
- Are students demonstrating professionalism, communication, and independence?
- Are work-based learning placements reinforcing classroom learning?
- Are pathway experiences accessible across student groups?

Strong high school PLCs help prevent pathways from becoming disconnected electives. They create the collaborative structure needed to maintain rigor, relevance, and coherence across academic and pathway learning.

### How the Pillar Operates

#### What Adults Actually Collaborate Around

Strong PLCs in career-connected schools study the whole student experience (as shown in Table 6).

They do not abandon traditional PLC work around standards, assessment, intervention, and enrichment. Instead, they broaden the evidence base to include the kinds of learning career-connected schools value: application, reflection, collaboration, presentation, persistence, and pathway readiness.

**Table 6. Common Areas of Collaboration in CANOPS PLCs**

| <b>Area of Collaboration</b>                 | <b>Questions Teams Might Ask</b>                                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Academic Standards</b>                    | What do students need to know and be able to do? Which standards need reteaching or enrichment?                |
| <b>Student Work</b>                          | What does the work show about student understanding? Where are students struggling to apply concepts?          |
| <b>Project Quality</b>                       | Is the project aligned with standards, authentic application, and career or pathway goals?                     |
| <b>Student Engagement</b>                    | Which students are becoming more engaged or less engaged during applied learning? What patterns do we notice?  |
| <b>Transferable Skills</b>                   | What do strong collaboration, communication, professionalism, and problem-solving look like across classrooms? |
| <b>Reflection and Identity Development</b>   | Are students building self-awareness and connecting experiences to interests and strengths?                    |
| <b>Pathway Alignment</b>                     | Are pathway experiences connected across classes, grades, and postsecondary expectations?                      |
| <b>Intervention and Enrichment</b>           | Which students need additional academic, advisory, behavioral, or project support?                             |
| <b>Exhibition and Presentation Readiness</b> | Are students prepared to explain their learning, process, and growth to an authentic audience?                 |
| <b>Equity and Access</b>                     | Which students are participating fully in pathways, projects, advanced coursework, and applied opportunities?  |

This broader PLC focus helps schools avoid separating academic achievement from engagement, identity development, and future readiness.

### **PLCs as Student Support Hubs**

In the CANOPS model, PLCs are one of the primary places in which adults notice student needs early and coordinate responses accordingly.

This does not mean PLCs replace counseling, special education, English Learner services, intervention programs, or school leadership teams. Instead, PLCs connect those supports to what students are experiencing in classrooms, projects, pathways, and experiential learning.

For example, a PLC might identify that a student needs

- reteaching on a specific standard,
- additional time or a different instructional approach,
- language support for a presentation or written explanation,
- accommodations or scaffolds for a project,
- behavioral or attendance support,
- advising related to pathway persistence,
- enrichment because they have already demonstrated mastery, or
- help accessing a career-connected opportunity.

The key is that student support is not treated as separate from instruction. Adults use PLCs to ask what students need, who will provide it, when it will happen, and how the team will know whether it worked.

### **From Evidence to Response: How PLCs Coordinate Student Support**

PLCs should be closely connected to intervention and enrichment systems.

When PLCs are implemented effectively, teams identify which students

- have not yet mastered a standard;
- need more time or a different instructional approach;
- need language, accessibility, or behavioral support;
- are ready for enrichment; and
- might need support to stay engaged in pathway or project work.

K–8 PLCs might use standard-level data to regroup students for intervention. High school PLCs might identify students who need support to remain on track in a pathway, dual credit course, certification sequence, or graduation requirement.

Intervention should not be separate from the instructional model. If students struggle in an experiential project, pathway course, or public presentation, PLCs should help adults determine whether the issue is academic, instructional, relational, logistical, or connected to confidence and support.

## WHAT HAPPENS IN AN EFFECTIVE PLC MEETING

A strong PLC meeting is structured, evidence based, and action oriented.

A typical meeting might include the following steps:

1. **Clarify the Learning Goal**—Which standard, skill, competency, or project outcome is the team focused on?
2. **Review Evidence**—Which data or student work will the team examine? This might include assessment results, student writing, project drafts, reflection journals, presentation rubrics, attendance trends, or intervention data.
3. **Identify Patterns**—What are students understanding? Where are they struggling? Which students need intervention or enrichment? What differences are showing up across classrooms or student groups?
4. **Determine Instructional Response**—What will teachers do next? What will be retaught, extended, scaffolded, revised, or coordinated?
5. **Assign Action Steps**—Who will do what before the next meeting?
6. **Follow Up**—Did the previous action improve student learning or participation?

The meeting should produce a clear instructional or support response: what will change, who will act, and how the team will follow up. If no adult practice changes as a result of the meeting, the PLC is not yet functioning as an improvement structure.



### Implementation Insight

***PLCs should produce instructional movement.***

A common mistake is treating the review of data as improvement. But data review alone is not enough. Teams might spend significant time looking at numbers, charts, or student work without deciding what will change next. Strong PLCs move from evidence to action that results in adjustments to instruction, intervention, project design, grouping, feedback, scaffolding, or enrichment.

#### **Evidence PLCs Use to Identify Student Needs**

Because career-connected learning includes multiple forms of student growth, teams should examine multiple types of evidence.

These forms of evidence might include

- common assessments,
- student work samples,
- standards mastery data,
- project drafts and final products,

- student reflection journals,
- presentation rubrics,
- exhibition feedback,
- collaboration or teamwork rubrics,
- attendance trends,
- student engagement surveys,
- intervention group movement,
- pathway enrollment and persistence data,
- credential or dual credit progress,
- work-based learning feedback, and
- advisory notes or portfolio artifacts.

The goal is not to collect every possible data point. The goal is to select evidence that helps adults answer the most important current question about student learning and experience.



## What This Might Look Like

### **Ninth Grade PLC Prepares Students for Public Exhibition**

A 9th grade pathway PLC reviews student performance evidence before a public exhibition to identify where students need additional support.

The PLC team notices that several students understand the technical content but are struggling to communicate their reasoning clearly. Rather than treating this as a presentation problem only, the team identifies a literacy and communication need.

Teachers decide to

- provide models of strong technical explanations,
- add structured peer critique,
- teach sentence frames for evidence-based reasoning,
- build in rehearsal time, and
- invite an industry partner to provide feedback on clarity and professionalism.

Accordingly, the PLC connects academic support, pathway expectations, and exhibition readiness.

### **PLCs and Interdisciplinary Coordination**

Career-connected learning often requires teachers to coordinate across subjects and roles. This is especially true for interdisciplinary projects, pathway experiences, and public exhibitions.

Schools might need to decide the following:

- Which teams meet weekly?
- When do interdisciplinary teams meet?
- How do pathway teachers connect with academic teachers?

- How are counselors or advisors included?
- How do intervention staff participate?
- Which meetings focus on instruction, and which focus on logistics?

Not every PLC needs to do everything. Strong systems often use different meeting structures for different purposes.

For example:

- grade-level PLCs might focus on student support and intervention,
- content PLCs might focus on standards and common assessments,
- pathway teams might focus on pathway coherence and industry alignment,
- project teams might meet during exhibition or project cycles, and
- leadership teams might review trends across PLCs.

The key is clarity. Adults need to know which collaborative structure owns which part of the work.

## **What Supports the Pillar: Conditions That Make PLCs Work**

PLCs do not become effective simply because time appears on the calendar. They require leadership, facilitation, schedules, data systems, professional learning, and trust.

### **Leadership and Facilitation Structures**

PLC quality depends heavily on facilitation quality and leadership consistency.

Effective facilitators help teams

- stay focused on student learning,
- use evidence productively,
- manage time,
- ensure all voices are heard,
- document action steps,
- return to prior commitments, and
- avoid drifting into logistics or venting.

Depending on the school structure, PLC facilitators might be

- grade-level leads,
- department chairs,
- pathway leads,
- instructional coaches,
- assistant principals, or
- teacher leaders.

Principals and school leaders play a critical role in protecting the integrity of PLCs. Their responsibilities often include

- protecting PLC time in the master schedule,
- clarifying expectations for PLC work,

- reviewing agendas and minutes,
- observing PLC meetings periodically,
- following up on action items,
- supporting facilitators,
- aligning professional development with PLC needs, and
- ensuring PLCs remain connected to schoolwide goals.

Network or district leaders might support PLC quality by

- establishing shared PLC expectations,
- providing facilitator training,
- aligning assessment and data systems,
- supporting cross-school calibration,
- monitoring implementation consistency, and
- creating opportunities for PLC leaders to learn from one another.



## Implementation Insight

***Templates do not create strong PLCs. Facilitation does.***

Agendas, minutes, and protocols are helpful, but they cannot substitute for skilled facilitation, trust, clarity, and leadership follow-through. Schools generally need to invest in developing their PLC facilitators before their PLCs can result in deep collaborative practice.

### **Scheduling and Organizational Conditions**

PLC time must be protected and predictable.

Strong PLC implementation usually requires

- at least one hour of weekly PLC time,
- common planning time built into the master schedule,
- clarity about which teams meet and why,
- participation from relevant support staff,
- structures for interdisciplinary coordination when needed,
- protected time for project and exhibition planning, and
- time for follow-up and intervention planning.

Scheduling decisions matter.

If PLCs are scheduled at times when key staff cannot attend, the work becomes fragmented. If interventionists, English Learner staff, or special education teachers are excluded, student support planning becomes less coherent. If pathway and academic teachers never collaborate, pathways can drift away from academic rigor.

Leaders should examine whether the schedule enables the kind of collaboration the model requires.

## **Data and Documentation Systems**

PLCs need access to useful evidence.

This may require systems for tracking

- standards mastery,
- common assessment results,
- student work,
- intervention groups,
- attendance,
- engagement,
- pathway participation,
- reflection artifacts,
- project completion,
- credential progress,
- dual credit progress, and
- exhibition feedback.

Documentation should support improvement, not become compliance work.

Useful PLC documentation typically includes

- meeting focus,
- evidence reviewed,
- student patterns identified,
- instructional decisions made,
- students needing intervention or enrichment,
- assigned action steps, and
- follow-up from previous meeting.

The purpose of the PLC documentation is to make adult decisions visible and follow-through possible.

## **Professional Learning and Capacity Building**

Adults need support, including professional learning, to use PLC time well.

To support adults in implementing and sustaining effective PLCs, professional learning may need to address

- facilitation skills,
- data analysis,
- student work protocols,
- standard-level analysis,
- common assessment development,
- project calibration,
- interdisciplinary planning,
- intervention design,
- feedback and revision cycles,
- analysis of student access, participation, and outcomes, and
- psychological safety and team norms.

Schools implementing career-connected learning may also need professional learning focused on how PLCs support experiential learning and pathways. Teachers may need practice examining project artifacts, reflection journals, performance tasks, and transferable skill rubrics—not just assessment scores.

New teacher onboarding should include guidance on PLC expectations and routines. Without that sort of onboarding support, PLC culture can weaken as staff change.

### **Student Support Integration**

Strong PLCs include the adults who support diverse learners, such as

- special education teachers,
- Teachers of Record,
- English Learner staff,
- Title I interventionists,
- counselors,
- social workers,
- advisors, and
- instructional coaches.

These staff help PLC teams interpret student needs more fully and design supports that are connected to classroom instruction.

For example:

- English Learner staff may help teachers scaffold academic language for presentations.
- Special education staff may help adapt project expectations without reducing rigor.
- Interventionists may identify patterns across small-group instruction and classroom performance.
- Counselors may bring insight into student engagement, confidence, or attendance concerns.

Integrating a range of staff helps PLCs turn data into coordinated instructional and support responses, rather than simply reporting what the data show.

## **How the Pillar Improves Over Time**

### **Monitoring, Refining, and Sustaining PLC Quality**

Strong PLCs mature over time. Early implementation often focuses on schedules, routines, and basic data use. More mature implementation focuses on deeper instructional refinement, coordinated student support, interdisciplinary coherence, pathway alignment, and continuous improvement of the student experience.

### **Indicators of Implementation Health**

Schools should monitor multiple types of indicators to understand whether PLCs are functioning as adult response systems that improve student learning and student support. These indicators can help leaders determine whether PLCs are changing what adults do for students or are simply operating as scheduled meetings.

#### **Student Learning and Experience Indicators**

- Students grow in standards mastery.
- Students receive and move through intervention or enrichment supports as needed.

- Students improve on common assessments or shared performance tasks.
- Students show increased engagement in projects or pathways.
- Students demonstrate stronger reflection and presentation quality.
- Students persist in pathways and show readiness for next steps.

#### Adult Practice Indicators

- Teachers review evidence of student learning and experience regularly.
- Teams identify specific instructional or support responses.
- Teachers examine student work, project artifacts, and reflection evidence.
- Teams calibrate rigor, expectations, and supports.
- Teachers follow up on prior action steps.
- Teams coordinate instruction, intervention, enrichment, advising, and student support.

#### System Indicators

- PLC time is protected in the schedule.
- Meeting agendas, decisions, and action steps are documented.
- Facilitators are trained and supported.
- Support staff participate in relevant PLCs.
- PLCs align with school improvement priorities.
- Leaders monitor PLC quality, follow-through, and impact on student experience.

Together, these indicators help leaders determine whether PLCs are functioning as improvement structures that change adult practice and strengthen student support, rather than simply as meeting structures.

#### Implementation Check: What to Watch For

Use these signals as prompts for reflection, not as a compliance checklist. A signal does not necessarily mean the pillar is failing; it identifies a place where teams may need to investigate, strengthen a structure, or adjust implementation.

### Pillar 2 Implementation Check: PLCs for Student-Centered Support

| What to watch for                                                 | What it may signal                                                                                      | What to do next                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Meetings are mostly about announcements, logistics, or operations | Protected PLC time is being used for management rather than instructional and student-support decisions | Separate operational business from PLC time and refocus agendas around student learning, experience, and response |

| What to watch for                                                                                      | What it may signal                                                              | What to do next                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teams review data but adult practice does not change                                                   | Data review has become an end in itself rather than a trigger for action        | Require each discussion to end with a specific instructional or support response, owner, and follow-up                    |
| Facilitators have not been trained or supported                                                        | PLC quality may depend too heavily on individual skill or personality           | Develop facilitators around questioning, evidence use, decision-making, team dynamics, and follow-through                 |
| Leaders do not monitor PLC quality                                                                     | Meetings may occur consistently while practice varies widely across teams       | Periodically review agendas, decisions, action steps, and evidence of follow-through; coach teams that need support       |
| Agendas, decisions, or action steps are vague                                                          | Teams may leave without clarity about what will change for students             | Use a simple meeting protocol that records the need identified, response selected, person responsible, and follow-up date |
| Counselors, special educators, EL staff, interventionists, or other support staff are routinely absent | Teams may be making decisions with an incomplete understanding of student needs | Include relevant support staff when their expertise is needed and clarify how they contribute to the team's response      |
| Teachers do not feel safe raising problems or examining practice                                       | PLCs may avoid the difficult conversations required for improvement             | Strengthen team norms, facilitator skill, and leader behavior that support productive disagreement and learning           |
| Interdisciplinary collaboration happens only through informal relationships                            | Coordination may disappear when staffing changes or workloads increase          | Protect formal opportunities for interdisciplinary and cross-pathway planning                                             |
| Academic and pathway teachers rarely plan together                                                     | Students may experience pathway learning and core academics as separate systems | Build shared planning around standards, projects, transferable skills, student work, and support needs                    |

| What to watch for                                            | What it may signal                                                          | What to do next                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teams collect large amounts of data without a clear question | Data volume may be obscuring rather than sharpening the problem             | Begin with a focused question and review only the evidence needed to understand it and decide on a response                       |
| PLC documentation is primarily completed for compliance      | Teams may be documenting meetings rather than improving student experiences | Reduce unnecessary paperwork and use documentation only when it helps teams remember decisions, monitor action, and assess impact |

### Implementation Phases

Implementing effective PLCs takes time. Schools do not need to implement every element at once, but they do need to build intentionally. In early phases, leaders may focus on protecting time, establishing routines, and helping teams use evidence consistently. Over time, PLCs should become more than a meeting structure. They should become a coordinated adult response system that helps teams identify student needs, adjust instruction, plan intervention and enrichment, and improve the full student experience.

Table 7 summarizes the focus areas and leadership priorities at each phase of building PLCs as part of the CANOPS model.

**Table 7. Implementation Phases for Building PLCs as an Adult Response System**

| Phase                            | Focus                                                    | Leadership Priorities                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Early Implementation</b>      | Establish time, structure, and shared expectations       | Protect weekly PLC time, identify facilitators, introduce guiding questions, adopt basic documentation |
| <b>Developing Implementation</b> | Strengthen evidence use and instructional response       | Review student work, develop common assessments, track intervention groups, follow up on action steps  |
| <b>Maturing Implementation</b>   | Deepen coherence across projects, pathways, and supports | Calibrate project quality, analyze engagement and reflection, coordinate interdisciplinary work        |

| Phase                           | Focus                                       | Leadership Priorities                                                                                                  |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Sustained Implementation</b> | Use PLCs as a continuous improvement engine | Support facilitator development, monitor PLC quality, onboard new staff, use PLC evidence to refine schoolwide systems |

This progression helps leaders avoid expecting advanced PLC practice before basic conditions are in place. It also clarifies that PLC implementation is not only about improving meetings. The goal is to build a reliable structure through which adults coordinate what students need and improve how the school responds over time.

### **Sustainability and Scaling Considerations**

PLCs are sustainable when they become part of the school's operating system.

To help ensure sustainability, leaders should consider whether PLC expectations are reflected in

- the master schedule,
- staff roles,
- facilitator selection,
- professional learning plans,
- new teacher onboarding,
- data systems,
- intervention systems,
- project planning cycles,
- school improvement goals, and
- evaluation and coaching conversations.

As schools scale career-connected learning, PLCs become even more important. Growth increases complexity. More pathways, projects, partners, and student experiences require stronger adult coordination.

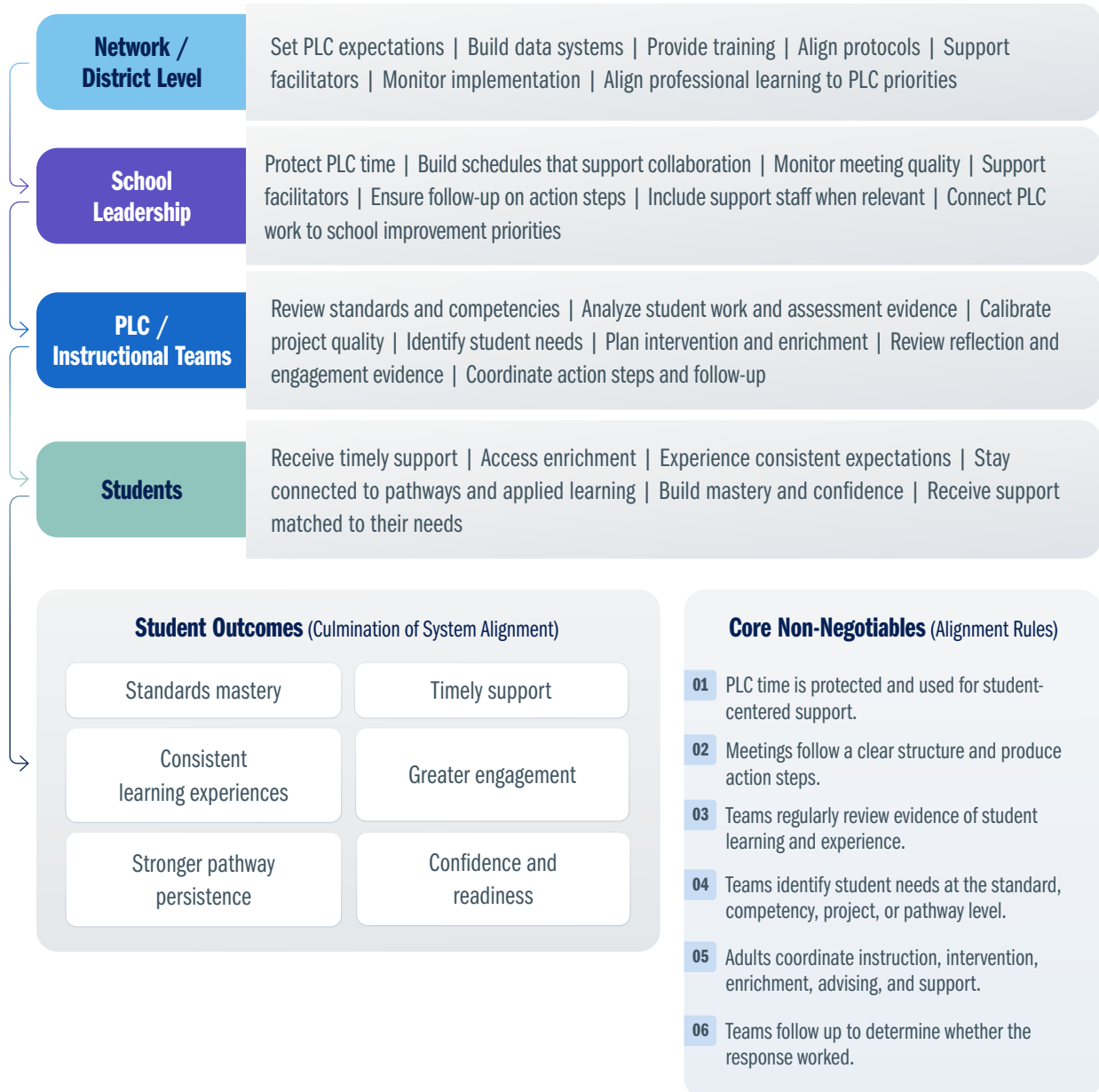
Before expanding implementation, leaders should ask the following:

- Are current PLCs producing instructional action?
- Are facilitators prepared to lead deeper collaboration?
- Are academic and pathway teachers collaborating effectively?
- Do support staff participate in student support planning?
- Are PLCs helping teachers improve project quality and rigor?
- Is the school using evidence beyond test scores to understand student experience?
- Are new staff being onboarded into PLC culture and expectations?

Strong PLC systems help career-connected schools coordinate adult practice so students receive coherent instruction, support, and opportunities as the model grows.



## System Map: Professional Learning Communities for Student-Centered Success



## Pillar 3: At a Glance

### Looking for...

### Start here

|                                                                      |                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>K–5, 6–8, or 9–12 guidance?</b>                                   | → <a href="#">Grade Span Sections</a>               |
| <b>How to design experiential learning with rigor and relevance?</b> | → <a href="#">How the Pillar Operates</a>           |
| <b>What conditions need to be in place?</b>                          | → <a href="#">What Supports the Pillar</a>          |
| <b>How to know whether implementation is healthy?</b>                | → <a href="#">How the Pillar Improves Over Time</a> |
| <b>What to watch for?</b>                                            | → <a href="#">Implementation Check</a>              |
| <b>Who owns what?</b>                                                | → <a href="#">System Map</a>                        |

## Pillar 3: Experiential Learning

### The Instructional Engine Behind Career-Connected Learning

#### Understanding the Pillar: Why Experiential Learning Matters

##### Pillar Overview

Experiential learning is the instructional engine of a career-connected school model. It involves students applying academic knowledge, solving authentic problems, collaborating with others, reflecting on their learning, connecting classroom content to careers, and demonstrating understanding for real audiences.

When effectively implemented, experiential learning is not just an occasional project, enrichment activity, or “fun Friday” add-on. It is a deliberate instructional design approach that helps students understand why learning matters and how academic skills transfer beyond school.

This pillar helps schools move from

*projects as occasional  
isolated activities*

to

*experiential learning as a coherent  
instructional design system.*

That distinction matters.

Students may enjoy hands-on activities, public presentations, or maker experiences, but those features alone do not guarantee deep learning. High-quality experiential learning requires intentional planning around academic standards, authentic application, reflection, revision, student support, and public demonstration of learning.

The purpose of experiential learning is not simply to make school more engaging. The purpose is to make learning more *transferable, meaningful, and visible*.

Strong experiential learning helps students

- apply academic standards in authentic contexts;
- connect learning to careers, industries, and community needs;
- develop collaboration, communication, and problem-solving skills;
- reflect on interests, strengths, and future possibilities;
- build confidence presenting and defending their work;
- revise work based on feedback; and
- experience learning as purposeful rather than disconnected.

For schools implementing career-connected learning, experiential learning becomes the bridge between academic instruction, career exploration, student identity development, pathway preparation, and public demonstration of learning.

Without this bridge, career preparation can become a separate program, and academic learning can remain disconnected from students' lives and futures.

### **Why This Pillar Matters**

Career-connected learning depends on students experiencing relevance, not just hearing about it.

Students need opportunities to see how academic skills are used to solve problems, design products, serve communities, communicate ideas, analyze information, make decisions, and improve systems.

Experiential learning creates these opportunities.

It helps students move from

***“Why do I need to learn this?”***

to

***“I can see how this knowledge helps me do something meaningful.”***

Learning that relates to students' lives and their futures matters across the K–12 experience. Younger students need concrete experiences that connect learning to the world around them. Middle school students need opportunities to explore identity, interests, teamwork, and real-world problem-solving. High school students need increasingly authentic opportunities to apply academic and technical skills in pathway, postsecondary, and workplace contexts.

Experiential learning also gives adults richer evidence of how students are learning. Teachers can observe how students

- collaborate,
- communicate,
- revise,
- apply feedback,
- solve unfamiliar problems,
- explain their reasoning,
- transfer skills across contexts, and
- persist through complexity.

These forms of evidence are especially valuable because they reveal student strengths and needs that traditional assessments may not fully capture.



## Implementation Insight

***Experiential learning often reveals student strengths that remain hidden in traditional instruction.***

A student who struggles on written assessments may demonstrate strong leadership during a design challenge. A student who is quiet in whole-group discussions may excel when presenting a prototype to a small audience. A student who appears disengaged during direct instruction may become highly invested when learning is connected to a real problem or career role.

Strong implementation requires adults to notice and use this evidence, not treat it as anecdotal.

One of the most important implementation challenges is protecting experiential learning from becoming activity-rich but learning-light.

High-quality experiential learning is not defined by whether students are busy, moving, building, or presenting. It is defined by whether students are engaging deeply with important learning goals through authentic application and reflection.

**Table 8. What High-Quality Experiential Learning Is and Is Not**

| Experiential Learning Is...                        | Experiential Learning Is Not...                  |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Standards-based</b>                             | A break from academic learning                   |
| <b>Connected to real problems or purposes</b>      | A disconnected activity                          |
| <b>Designed with reflection and revision</b>       | A one-time event                                 |
| <b>Supported by adult planning and calibration</b> | Dependent on individual teacher creativity alone |

| Experiential Learning Is...                              | Experiential Learning Is Not...                   |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Connected to career awareness or pathway learning</b> | A generic project with a career label added later |
| <b>Inclusive of all students</b>                         | Only for students already succeeding academically |
| <b>Evidence-generating</b>                               | Something outside the learning system             |
| <b>Strengthened through public demonstration</b>         | A polished showcase without deep learning         |

The distinctions between a high-quality Is and an Is Not matter because schools can easily adopt the visible features of experiential learning without building the instructional discipline underneath it.

For example:

- a project can be engaging but weakly aligned with standards,
- a showcase can be polished but not reveal deep learning,
- a career connection can be mentioned but not meaningfully explored,
- a hands-on activity can be enjoyable but not intellectually demanding, or
- a final product can look impressive while student reflection remains shallow.

Strong implementation requires leaders and teachers to ask the following:

- What are students learning?
- How are they applying that learning?
- What evidence will show whether they understand it?
- How does the experience connect to real-world use?
- How will students reflect on their learning, strengths, and growth?
- How will all students be supported to participate meaningfully?

### **Core Non-Negotiables**

Experiential learning can be adapted across many contexts, but several core expectations help maintain quality and coherence.

#### **1. Standards-Based, Problem-Driven Design**

Projects should begin with academic standards and a meaningful problem, question, challenge, or purpose.

Experiential learning does not replace standards. It deepens them by giving students opportunities to apply knowledge in authentic contexts.

A strong project should make clear

- which standards students are learning;
- what problem or question students are investigating;
- what types of evidence will show learning;
- how students will revise and reflect; and
- how the experience connects to careers, community, or real-world application.

## **2. Career Alignment Each Semester**

Every experiential learning cycle should include an authentic connection to careers, industries, or real-world roles.

This does not mean every project needs to simulate a specific job. It does mean students should understand how the knowledge, skills, tools, or problems they are working with connect to the world beyond school.

For example:

- a science investigation may connect to healthcare, environmental science, agriculture, or manufacturing;
- a writing project may connect to journalism, advocacy, technical communication, or marketing;
- a math project may connect to architecture, engineering, finance, or data analysis; or
- a social studies project may connect to public policy, law, community organizing, or entrepreneurship.

## **3. Public Demonstration of Learning**

Students should have recurring opportunities to present their work, process, and reflection to audiences beyond the classroom.

In the CANOPS model, this includes two public showcases annually, one in the fall and one in the spring. Other schools may adapt the format, but the design principle remains important: Public demonstration increases purpose, accountability, communication, and student ownership.

A strong showcase or exhibition should include

- the product or performance,
- explanation of the learning process,
- evidence of academic understanding,
- reflection on challenges and growth, and
- connection to careers or real-world application.

## **4. Reflection and Revision**

Experiential learning requires students to reflect on both what they learned and how they learned it.

Reflection should help students make sense of

- academic growth,
- collaboration,
- problem-solving,
- feedback,
- persistence,
- interests and strengths, and
- career or pathway connections.

Revision is also essential. Students should have opportunities to improve work based on feedback rather than simply complete a one-time task.

## **5. Universal Participation**

Experiential learning should be part of the core instructional experience for all students, not an enrichment opportunity for a select group.

This means schools need to intentionally plan for accommodations, language supports, scaffolds, intervention, materials, scheduling, and access so that all students can participate meaningfully.



### **Watch For**

---

Experiential learning may need recalibration when

- projects are engaging but weakly aligned with standards,
- career connections are added after the project is designed,
- exhibitions emphasize polish more than learning,
- reflection is skipped when time gets tight,
- projects depend on a few highly motivated teachers,
- students cannot explain what they learned or why it matters,
- only some students have access to high-quality applied experiences, or
- final products look impressive but do not show deep understanding.

These are early signs that experiential learning may be drifting from instructional design into activity design.

## **Developmental Role Across Grade Bands**

The purpose of experiential learning remains consistent across K–12: Students apply learning in meaningful contexts. However, the design, complexity, independence, and authenticity of experiences should deepen over time.

## K–5: Exposure, Curiosity, and Foundational Application



In the elementary grades, experiential learning helps students connect academic skills to concrete experiences, community roles, and early career awareness.

At this stage, students benefit from

- hands-on exploration,
- collaborative problem-solving,
- storytelling and role-play,
- simple design challenges,
- community-connected projects,
- maker experiences, and
- reflection on interests and strengths.

The goal is not advanced technical skill or early specialization. The goal is helping students experience themselves as capable learners, problem-solvers, collaborators, and contributors.

This might look like the following:

- kindergarten students using measurement, vocabulary, and sequencing in a baking project connected to culinary careers;
- third grade students researching national parks while exploring environmental and public service careers;
- elementary students designing classroom or community solutions while learning about engineering, architecture, entrepreneurship, or public service; or
- students using a makerspace to build prototypes connected to a story, science concept, or community need.

Teachers help students make meaning from the experience by asking the following:

- What did we create or solve?
- What skills did we use?
- How did we work together?
- What kinds of adults do similar work?
- What did you learn about yourself?



### What This Might Look Like

#### ***Kindergarten Baking Project Connects Learning to Community Roles***

A kindergarten class completes a baking project connected to measurement, vocabulary development, sequencing, and community roles.

Students measure ingredients, follow steps, describe textures and quantities, and discuss careers connected to food preparation, nutrition, farming, entrepreneurship, and customer service. Students practice collaboration and communication while reflecting on which parts of the project they enjoyed most.

The project is not simply a cooking activity. It becomes experiential learning because it connects academic content, hands-on application, career awareness, language development, and reflection.

## 6–8: Exploration, Identity, and Interdisciplinary Application



In the middle grades, experiential learning becomes more complex and reflective.

Students are ready to explore

- broader real-world problems,
- interdisciplinary connections,
- emerging career interests,
- teamwork roles,
- personal strengths,
- early pathway awareness, and
- public presentation and feedback.

At this stage, experiential learning should help students move from exposure toward identity development.

Experiential learning at this stage might involve

- environmental science projects connected to data analysis and public health;
- engineering design challenges connected to community needs;
- entrepreneurship projects connected to marketing, finance, and communication;
- media production projects connected to storytelling and technical skills; or
- civic action projects connected to public policy or community problem-solving.

Middle school students need structured opportunities to reflect on

- the kinds of problems that interest them,
- how they contribute to teams,
- which skills they are developing,
- how academic subjects connect to future possibilities, and
- which career areas they want to explore further.

In grades 6–8, schools should watch for superficial exploration. That is, students may complete projects across multiple subjects but still fail to understand how those experiences connect to interests, strengths, or future pathways unless adults intentionally build reflection and advising into the process.



## What This Might Look Like

### ***Seventh Grade Water Quality Investigation***

A 7th grade team designs an environmental systems project connected to science, mathematics, writing, and public communication.

Students collect local water quality data, analyze patterns, research possible causes of their findings, and develop recommendations for community awareness. Teachers help students connect the project to careers in environmental science, public health, civil engineering, data analysis, and urban planning.

Students present their findings to families or community partners and complete reflection prompts about their roles, interests, and problem-solving strengths.

The project supports experiential learning because students are applying standards, using data, collaborating, connecting to careers, and presenting to an authentic audience.

## 9–12: Pathway Application, Public Demonstration, and Postsecondary Readiness



In high school, experiential learning should become increasingly connected to pathway participation, postsecondary preparation, and authentic demonstration of learning.

Students benefit from opportunities to

- solve industry-connected problems,
- complete pathway-aligned projects,
- participate in internships or work-based learning,
- earn credentials or dual credit,
- present to authentic audiences,
- receive feedback from adults beyond the classroom, and
- demonstrate readiness through applied performance.

This might involve

- **biomedical** students analyzing case studies and presenting health recommendations,
- **engineering** students designing prototypes for community or industry partners,
- **marketing** students developing campaigns for local organizations,
- **education** pathway students designing and teaching mini lessons,
- **welding or manufacturing** students completing applied production challenges, or
- **all** students completing capstone projects connected to pathway and postsecondary goals.

At this stage, experiential learning should help students develop

- independence,
- professionalism,
- technical confidence,
- communication skills,
- postsecondary planning clarity, and
- readiness for feedback beyond the classroom.

High school implementation requires careful coordination so experiential learning remains rigorous, equitable, and connected to graduation and pathway expectations.



### Watch For

High school experiential learning may need recalibration when

- pathway projects are disconnected from core academic standards;
- internships are placements without structured learning goals;
- industry partners provide feedback but teachers do not integrate it instructionally;
- public exhibitions emphasize final products but not process, reflection, or academic reasoning;
- student experiences vary widely by pathway; or
- only some pathways have strong applied learning opportunities.

These signs often indicate that experiential learning needs stronger alignment, calibration, and instructional support.

## How the Pillar Operates: Designing Experiential Learning With Rigor, Relevance, and Reflection

High-quality experiential learning is built intentionally. It requires adults to design backward from academic standards, student outcomes, authentic application, reflection, and evidence of learning.

A useful design sequence includes the following steps:

**1. Identify the learning goals.**

Which standards, skills, or competencies should students develop?

**2. Choose an authentic problem, question, or purpose.**

Which real-world issue, role, field, audience, or application gives the learning meaning?

**3. Design the student task.**

What will students create, investigate, solve, present, or perform?

**4. Plan supports and scaffolds.**

Which instruction, modeling, materials, accommodations, or language supports will students need?

**5. Build in feedback and revision.**

How will students improve their work over time?

**6. Plan reflection.**

How will students make sense of what they learned about content, skills, interests, and future connections?

**7. Determine evidence of learning.**

What student work, performance, presentation, or reflection will demonstrate understanding?

This design process helps schools avoid treating experiential learning as a loosely defined activity.

### What Students Experience

Experiential learning should be a purposeful learning cycle for students, not simply a project deadline.

A strong cycle often includes

- introduction to a meaningful question, challenge, or problem;
- instruction connected to academic standards;
- opportunities to investigate, design, create, or apply;
- collaboration with peers;
- feedback from teachers, peers, or external audiences;
- revision and refinement;
- reflection on learning and growth; and
- public demonstration or sharing of work.

Students should be able to explain

- what they learned,
- why it mattered,
- how they applied it,
- what challenges they encountered,
- how their thinking changed,
- which skills they developed, and
- how the experience connects to careers or future opportunities.

If students can describe what they did but not what they learned, the experience may need stronger instructional design.

### **What Adults Do**

Teachers play a critical role in making experiential learning rigorous.

They do not simply assign projects. They design and facilitate learning experiences that connect academic content, application, collaboration, reflection, and evidence of mastery.

To facilitate effective experiential learning, teachers might

- unpack standards and identify priority learning goals,
- design authentic tasks connected to real problems or careers,
- teach content and skills that students need to succeed,
- scaffold collaboration and project management,
- model how to give and use feedback,
- support students through revision cycles,
- facilitate reflection on learning and strengths, and
- assess both content mastery and application.

School leaders and instructional coaches support teachers by helping ensure that projects are

- standards-aligned,
- appropriately rigorous,
- developmentally appropriate,
- connected to career or community relevance,
- accessible to all students,
- supported by adequate time and resources, and
- calibrated across classrooms or grade levels.



### **Implementation Insight**

***The quality of experiential learning depends heavily on adult planning and calibration.***

PLCs are especially important here. Teachers need time to review project designs, examine student work, calibrate expectations, and refine supports. When teachers plan projects

independently without shared expectations, students may experience uneven rigor, unclear expectations, or disconnected career connections. Collaborative planning helps ensure that experiential learning remains coherent across classrooms and grade levels.

### **Career Alignment**

Career alignment should be built into the project design from the beginning.

A common implementation mistake is designing a project first and then adding a career connection at the end. Students notice when career connections feel superficial.

Strong career alignment helps students understand

- what kinds of adults work on similar problems,
- which skills and tools those adults use,
- how academic learning connects to career fields,
- what postsecondary preparation might be needed, and
- what kinds of work environments or roles may fit different interests.

Career alignment can happen through

- project themes,
- guest experts,
- field experiences,
- industry problems,
- workplace tools,
- professional roles,
- student reflection,
- pathway connections, and
- public feedback from practitioners.

The purpose of career alignment is not to force every student toward a specific career. The purpose is to help students see learning as connected to real-world possibilities.

### **Reflection and Revision**

Reflection is what turns experience into learning.

Without reflection, students may complete a project without understanding what they learned, how they grew, or how the experience connects to future opportunities.

Reflection should happen throughout the learning cycle, not only at the end.

Students may reflect on

- content understanding,
- collaboration,
- problem-solving,
- feedback,
- persistence,
- interests,
- strengths,
- career connections, and
- future questions.

Revision is equally important. Students need opportunities to improve work based on feedback. This helps students understand that high-quality work develops over time.

To support reflection and revision, schools may use

- reflection journals,
- exit tickets,
- peer critique protocols,
- teacher conferences,
- presentation rehearsals,
- exhibition reflections,
- student-led conferences, or
- portfolios.

Strong implementation treats reflection and revision as instructional practices, not optional add-ons.

## **What Supports the Pillar: Conditions That Make Experiential Learning Work**

Experiential learning requires system conditions that support planning, collaboration, materials, scheduling, professional learning, and access.

### **Leadership and Staffing Structures**

Strong implementation requires clear leadership for experiential learning.

Depending on school size and context, this may include

- network or district leaders responsible for model coherence and quality standards;
- school leaders responsible for schedules, resources, and implementation monitoring;
- instructional coaches or project-based learning leads;
- pathway directors;
- teacher leaders;
- makerspace or project coordinators; and
- community partnership coordinators.

In the CANOPS model, a Director of Experiential Learning supports network-level coherence. This role may involve

- establishing project quality standards,
- coordinating professional learning,
- ensuring vertical alignment across grade levels,
- supporting partnership development,
- monitoring implementation fidelity, and
- analyzing implementation data across schools.

At the building level, a Maker Manager or similar role may support teachers by

- assisting with project design,
- managing materials and prototyping resources,
- supporting makerspace use,
- reinforcing project-based learning design principles, and
- helping with implementation logistics.

Other schools may not use these same titles, but the underlying functions matter. Someone must help coordinate quality, resources, teacher support, and implementation follow-through.

### **Scheduling and Structural Conditions**

Experiential learning must be supported by the schedule.

Implementation may require time for

- interdisciplinary planning,
- extended project work,
- makerspace use,
- field experiences,
- guest speakers,
- exhibition preparation,
- feedback and revision,
- public showcases,
- student reflection, and
- teacher collaboration.

Schools can use different scheduling approaches, such as

- makerspace integration in elementary grades,
- interdisciplinary planning blocks in middle school,
- block scheduling in high school,
- project weeks,
- “Experiential Fridays,”
- advisory or reflection periods, and
- common planning time for project teams.

The schedule should support both the student experience and adult planning needs.

A common implementation risk is expecting teachers to implement complex projects without giving them time to plan, coordinate, and reflect. Experiential learning becomes much harder to sustain when it is added on top of existing expectations without structural support.



### **What This Might Look Like**

#### ***Middle School PLC Planning Blocks Before a Public Showcase***

A middle school team protects two planning blocks before each public showcase cycle.

During the first block, teachers align standards, project tasks, and career connections. During the second, they review student drafts, identify supports needed for presentation, and coordinate exhibition logistics.

This structure prevents showcase preparation from becoming last-minute and helps ensure that the exhibition reflects meaningful learning rather than rushed completion.

## **Professional Learning and Capacity Building**

Annual professional development is essential for sustaining experiential learning.

Educators may need professional learning in

- project-based learning design,
- standards alignment,
- career integration,
- interdisciplinary planning,
- student reflection,
- feedback and revision,
- exhibition design,
- assessment of applied learning,
- supporting collaboration, and
- scaffolding for diverse learners.

In the CANOPS model, required professional development includes

- summer project-based learning training,
- World of Work/RIASEC alignment training,
- administrator training in experiential learning expectations, and
- new teacher onboarding in project design.

One lesson learned from implementation is that fidelity declines when professional development is not sustained annually. New staff need onboarding, returning staff need calibration, and leaders need shared expectations for what quality looks like.

Professional learning should not be limited to workshops. Teachers also need opportunities to

- examine project examples,
- tune project designs,
- review student work,
- observe strong implementation,
- receive coaching,
- reflect after exhibitions, and
- revise projects for future cycles.

## **Materials, Space, and Logistics**

Experiential learning often requires operational planning beyond traditional instruction.

Schools should consider

- materials and supplies,
- storage,
- makerspace or lab access,
- technology,
- transportation,
- partner scheduling,
- safety procedures,
- exhibition space,
- family communication,
- accessibility,
- translation or interpretation needs, and
- calendar planning.

These logistical details may seem secondary, but they affect quality and access.

For example, if materials are inconsistent, some classrooms may be able to offer richer projects than others. If transportation is not planned, field experiences or work-based learning may be limited. If exhibition dates are not set early, public demonstration may become rushed or uneven.

Strong implementation includes logistics in the annual operating calendar rather than treating them as last-minute details.

### **Access for All Students**

Experiential learning should be part of the core instructional experience for all students.

All students need access to rigorous, supported, meaningful applied learning experiences. This includes students with disabilities, English Learners, students receiving intervention, students from families with low income, and students who may not yet see themselves as successful learners.

Supports may include

- IEP (individualized education program) accommodations embedded in project design,
- collaboration with Teachers of Record,
- English learner language scaffolds,
- visual supports and models,
- flexible grouping,
- structured collaboration roles,
- modified presentation formats when appropriate,
- MTSS (multi-tiered system of supports) connected to project demands,
- transportation or materials support, and
- scaffolded reflection prompts.

The goal is not to lower expectations. The goal is to design supports so all students can participate meaningfully in rigorous work.

### **How the Pillar Improves Over Time: Monitoring, Refining, and Sustaining Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning improves through repeated cycles of design, implementation, reflection, feedback, and refinement. Schools should expect quality to develop over time as teachers build capacity, leaders strengthen systems, and students become more skilled at reflection, collaboration, and public demonstration.

### **Indicators of Implementation Health**

Schools should monitor multiple types of indicators to understand whether experiential learning is functioning as rigorous instructional design, not just as isolated projects or special events. These indicators can help leaders see whether students are applying academic learning in meaningful contexts, receiving support to improve their work, and demonstrating learning for authentic audiences.

### **Student Experience Indicators**

- Students can explain what they learned and why it matters.
- Students participate in reflection and revision.
- Students demonstrate collaboration and problem-solving.
- Students present learning to authentic audiences.
- Students show engagement, ownership, and agency.
- Students connect projects to careers, pathways, or future opportunities.

### **Adult Practice Indicators**

- Teachers design projects aligned with academic standards.
- Teachers integrate authentic career connections.
- Teachers scaffold participation for diverse learners.
- PLCs review project quality, student work, and reflection evidence.
- Teachers use feedback to refine projects over time.
- Teams calibrate expectations across classrooms.

### **System Indicators**

- Showcase dates are built into the annual calendar.
- Teachers have protected planning time for project design.
- Materials, logistics, and audience needs are planned in advance.
- Professional learning for experiential learning is sustained annually.
- Leaders monitor access, consistency, and quality across classrooms.
- Partnerships support authentic application and public demonstration.

Together, these indicators help leaders determine whether experiential learning is becoming a consistent part of instructional design or slipping into disconnected projects, one-time events, or end-of-unit activities that do not build student skills over time.

### **Implementation Check: What to Watch For**

Use these signals as prompts for reflection, not as a compliance checklist. A signal does not necessarily mean the pillar is failing; it identifies a place where teams may need to investigate, strengthen a structure, or adjust implementation.

## Pillar 3 Implementation Check: Experiential Learning

| What to watch for                                        | What it may signal                                                                                | What to do next                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Projects are not clearly connected to academic standards | Experiential learning may be functioning as an activity rather than core instruction              | Require projects to identify priority standards, learning goals, and evidence of student mastery during the design process                |
| Career connections feel superficial or added on          | Students may see career references without understanding authentic applications of learning       | Involve employers, community partners, and pathway staff earlier in project design and connect them to real problems, roles, or audiences |
| Reflection is skipped or treated as optional             | Students may complete experiences without recognizing what they learned or how they grew          | Build reflection into project milestones, revision, exhibitions, and post-project discussion                                              |
| Exhibitions become displays of finished products         | Public demonstration may emphasize presentation over evidence of learning                         | Design exhibitions around explanation, evidence, questioning, reflection, and demonstration of standards or competencies                  |
| Teachers design projects largely in isolation            | Project quality and expectations may vary substantially across classrooms                         | Protect collaborative planning time and use PLCs to review project plans, student work, and results                                       |
| Strong projects depend on a few enthusiastic teachers    | Experiential learning may be a collection of individual practices rather than a schoolwide system | Establish common expectations, shared tools, professional learning, onboarding, and planning structures                                   |
| Students do not receive sufficient scaffolding           | Some students may participate without being able to access the rigor of the task                  | Plan supports, checkpoints, models, feedback, accommodations, and differentiated access without lowering expectations                     |
| Expectations for rigor vary substantially among adults   | Students may have dramatically different learning experiences depending on classroom or teacher   | Calibrate project quality and student work across teams using shared criteria and exemplars                                               |

| What to watch for                                     | What it may signal                                                                                     | What to do next                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Project logistics are added to the calendar too late  | Strong instructional ideas may break down because time, spaces, partners, or audiences are unavailable | Build project cycles, partner needs, work time, and exhibitions into annual and master calendars                                          |
| Materials and resources vary widely across classrooms | Opportunity to engage meaningfully may depend on teacher budget or access                              | Plan materials and resource needs centrally and monitor whether classrooms have what implementation requires                              |
| Participation or access varies across student groups  | Some students may receive less rigorous, authentic, or visible experiential learning                   | Examine who participates, the roles students take, the supports they receive, and the quality of experiences across groups                |
| Professional learning is one-time or inconsistent     | Quality may stall or weaken as staff change                                                            | Provide recurring professional learning on project design, standards alignment, scaffolding, reflection, feedback, and exhibition quality |

**Table 9. Implementation Phases for Building Experiential Learning as an Instructional Design System**

| Phase                            | Focus                                         | Leadership Priorities                                                                                                          |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Early Implementation</b>      | Establish expectations and initial structures | Define project quality, schedule showcases, provide foundational project-based learning (PBL) training, identify support roles |
| <b>Developing Implementation</b> | Strengthen alignment and consistency          | Align projects with standards, build reflection routines, support interdisciplinary planning, monitor access                   |
| <b>Maturing Implementation</b>   | Deepen authenticity and rigor                 | Engage partners, calibrate exhibitions, strengthen career connections, review student work across teams                        |

| Phase                           | Focus                                   | Leadership Priorities                                                                                                            |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Sustained Implementation</b> | Institutionalize continuous improvement | Maintain annual professional development, onboard new staff, refine projects based on evidence, align resources and partnerships |

This progression helps schools avoid expecting fully mature implementation immediately while still building toward quality and coherence over time.

### **Sustainability and Scaling Considerations**

Experiential learning becomes sustainable when it is embedded into the school's operating systems.

Leaders should consider whether experiential learning is reflected in

- curriculum planning,
- master schedules,
- professional learning calendars,
- PLC agendas,
- staffing roles,
- materials budgets,
- partnership plans,
- annual exhibition calendars,
- assessment practices,
- student support systems, and
- family communication routines.

Funding may support implementation through multiple sources, depending on local context. These may include

- general operating funds,
- Title II for professional learning,
- Perkins funding for secondary pathway alignment,
- local grants or philanthropy,
- partner contributions, and
- materials or equipment budgets.

Schools should avoid treating experiential learning as dependent on temporary funding alone. The model becomes sustainable when staffing, professional learning, planning time, materials, and exhibition cycles are part of the regular school design.

Before scaling, leaders should ask:

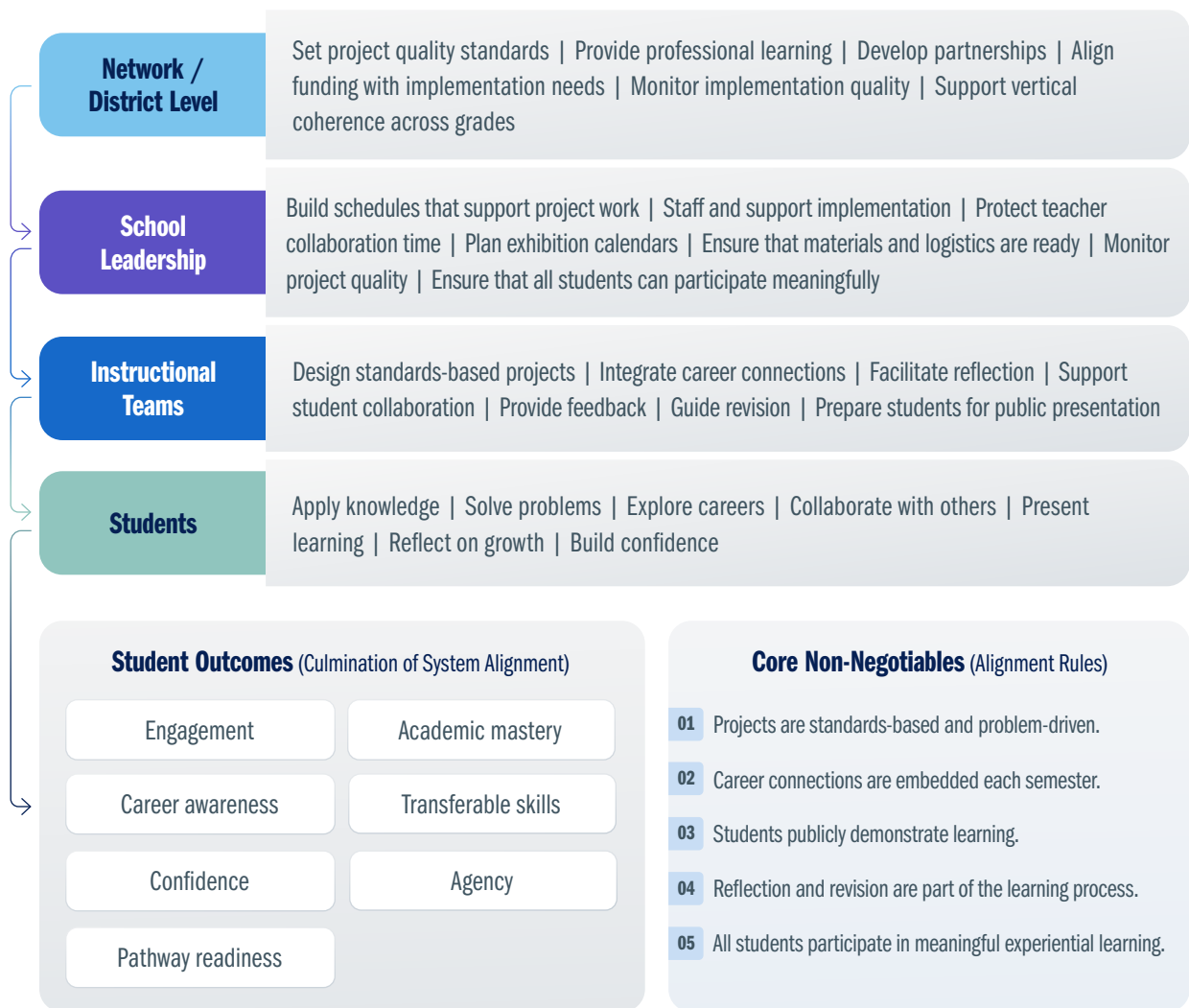
- Are current projects rigorous and standards-aligned?
- Do teachers have the capacity and support to sustain implementation?
- Are students experiencing meaningful reflection and revision?
- Are exhibitions revealing deep learning?
- Are career connections authentic?

- Is access equitable across students and classrooms?
- Are support roles clear?
- Are resources and logistics manageable?
- Are new teachers onboarded effectively?

The goal is not simply to increase the number of projects students complete. The goal is to strengthen the conditions that make applied learning rigorous, meaningful, accessible, and sustainable over time.



## System Map: Experiential Learning System



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