

Building Equitable Pathways Series

# Intermediaries' Role in Policy to Develop and Scale Equitable Pathways

## Introduction

The growth of intermediaries is part of a broad trend within our economy and society toward fluid, networked, and interactive systems. Intermediaries have become increasingly crucial actors that connect education and workforce development by building and organizing multi-partner, cross-sector collaborative efforts to better serve individuals, meet the needs of employers, and ensure that regional economies thrive.

Intermediaries play a key role bringing together leaders in K-12 and postsecondary education systems, workforce organizations, industry, and government to build equitable pathways to college and career. And because they work across such diverse sets of stakeholders, intermediaries gain knowledge and insights from a number of perspectives and are therefore uniquely positioned to recognize gaps in policy and barriers that prevent implementation and scaling of quality pathways initiatives. And that unique positioning enables them to play an important role in educating and informing policymakers.

The purpose of this brief is to help intermediaries better understand why policy is an important tool in efforts to implement and scale [equitable pathways](#).

By *policy* we mean both legislation and rules as well as the principles that guide programmatic decision-making and lead to specific outcomes. Policies can be formally enacted in laws, rules, and regulations by government entities—the federal government and state, regional, and local bodies—and policy can be influenced and developed by higher education systems, school districts, and workforce boards.

This brief elevates the importance of all policy and emphasize the potential ways in which intermediaries can influence policy within their local and state ecosystems. It also presents examples of intermediaries that are implementing equitable pathways and others that have been

successful in policy-related activities. By better understanding the power they have to influence policy, intermediaries can be more effective in supporting their partners and driving positive change in their communities and across their states.

## Why Policy is Important

Policy plays a significant role shaping behavior and is essential to creating lasting improvements across practice, programs, and systems. Specific to education and workforce development, policy across all levels—local, state, and federal—can help support and scale best practices while also affecting the lives and futures of today’s workers, learners, and jobseekers and influencing employers and regional economies.

Federal policy and laws often act as quality assurance. They govern the allocation of federal funds to states and regions, dictating how much money states will receive for education and workforce programs and establishing the guidelines and requirements that specify how those dollars will be used to ensure that the federal funds are meeting the needs of intended populations.

States, in turn, set their own policies that determine how state agencies will comply with the federal mandates. This requires state policymakers and agency staff to interpret federal legislation and decide how funding will trickle down to on-the-ground local work. Additionally, state executive and legislative branches pass their own policies that determine key education and workforce development decisions. Similarly, higher education systems and school districts have policymaking mechanisms of their own.

Policymakers will also look to their counterparts—other states and other systems—for best practices. If a policy works well in one state or system, leaders in other areas, who have similar commitments may notice and adopt that policy. There are national organizations that facilitate this process by aggregating and comparing education policies across the country. They include the Education Commission of the States (ECS) and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO). Both define themselves as “the policy team” for their constituents. Local regions, cities, and counties also interpret and leverage federal and state policies while setting priorities of their own. It is common for local governments and systems to be more innovative because they operate on a smaller scale and have the ability to collaborate more easily with multiple partners to implement new strategies.

On-the-ground practitioners who want to influence the design and implementation of policy at any level must engage in advocacy to share their firsthand insights and lessons learned with

policymakers. All policy action should seek to close equity gaps, and intermediaries can help identify and elevate the diverse needs of individuals in their community and clarify how policy decisions will affect their most marginalized community members. The “Intermediaries in Action” section profiles intermediaries that all work to address the needs of Black and Latinx youth and young people experiencing poverty. These young people often face deep-rooted systemic barriers that prevent them from successfully developing the skills, knowledge, and experiences they need to advance economically. Intermediaries can help break down those barriers.

### Intermediaries and Advocacy

Advocacy is a powerful tool that can draw attention to issues and amplify the voices of people who often go unheard. Advocacy efforts can help change policy and practice at the local, state, or national level. While this work is extremely important, intermediaries that decide to get involved in advocacy should be cautious and take time to learn the rules and restrictions governing state and federal lobbying (if applicable), especially if they seek to engage with politicians or other individuals who serve in public office.

Intermediaries are well suited to be part of policy conversations because they have a commitment to equity and the ability to bring together—and learn from—a diverse set of stakeholders. By discovering or enhancing their roles in policy, intermediaries can help ensure that practice and law more equitably serve individuals, communities, and regional economies.

## Policy Roles of an Intermediary

Intermediaries have many strengths that enable them to effectively play a variety of roles in the policy ecosystem, and they don’t have to choose just one! To identify opportunities for getting more involved, they can evaluate the work they currently do and look for areas of overlap with the following list of organizational actions that are critical to understanding policy and formulating strategies.

### Understand the Policy Environment

- Intermediaries understand the key federal and state policies that impact their work and explain relevant policies to their partners.
- Intermediaries are aware of and understand different coalitions, stakeholders, and political interests at work in their community and how that influences the policy context.

## Design Policy Solutions

- Intermediaries assess policies that are potential barriers or incentives to their work.
- Intermediaries understand what “good” policy is and design solutions that actually work on the ground and benefit the intended people and communities.
- Intermediaries have the unique ability to convene groups of stakeholders from across sectors and systems. Good policy development conversations don’t happen in siloes. Intermediaries utilize their relationship-building powers to bring together many voices to inform policy solutions.

## Mobilize Coalitions

- Effective intermediaries don’t work alone in policy conversations. They identify and mobilize coalitions or groups in support of policies that advance their common interests. These group efforts could include understanding, changing, or implementing policies.

## Inform and Advocate

- Intermediaries acknowledge and understand the diverse perspectives of all stakeholders in order to effectively advocate for policies that best serve their partners’ key needs and help close equity gaps.
- Education and workforce intermediaries usually have a good deal of credibility because they have reputations of bringing value to the regions they serve. They can leverage their reputations to play advisory roles on community, regional, or statewide committees and use those platforms to engage in advocacy.
- Intermediaries share lessons they learn in the field with state and federal policymakers who are often looking for innovative ways to update laws and welcome insights on what is and isn’t working on the ground.

## Lead Implementation of Policy

- Intermediaries verify that funds are allocated fairly and accurately, and thereby ensure that communities and partners receive, and make the best use of, the resources that are due to them from federal, state, and local programs.
- Intermediaries use their convening power to promote and create combined state plans. Planning efforts that encompass multiple federal programs (for example, the Every Student Succeeds Act, the Strengthening Career and Technical Education Act for the 21st Century, or the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) lessen the likelihood of duplication and yield aligned outcomes and the ability to more easily braid and blend resources. This approach better supports work on the ground and the individuals being

served; it also requires mobilizing local and regional actors to participate in combined statewide planning.

## Intermediaries in Action

Intermediaries can play serious roles in advocating for state and local policies that expand equitable pathways and ensure that all young people across our nation have the skills necessary to succeed after high school. All intermediaries have the ability to do this work, which involves analyzing and making use of existing policies to end practices that negatively impact Black and Latinx youth and young people experiencing poverty. Intermediaries can use their knowledge and convening power to influence the field, mobilize stakeholders and resources, and advocate for the creation of effective policies.

The following examples of intermediaries in action highlight successful approaches that organizations have used to be stronger partners, advocates, and implementers in their regional or state policy ecosystems. While each example offers informative lessons about effective strategies and practices, it is important to remember that policy environments look different everywhere and there's no one-size-fits-all approach. Individual intermediaries will each chart their own paths to success.

### Intermediaries in Action: Policy Roles

| Intermediary  | Policy Roles                             |
|---|--|
| <b>Career Connect Washington</b>                                | Understand and Design Solutions          |
| <b>Education Systems Center of Northern Illinois University</b> | Design Solutions and Lead Implementation |
| <b>YouthForce NOLA</b>  | Mobilize and Inform                      |
| <b>CareerWise Colorado and CareerWise New York</b>              | Advocate and Mobilize                    |

## Career Connect Washington

[Career Connect Washington](#) is a collective action initiative that works statewide with the mission of combining classroom learning with practical career experiences for youth and young adults to ensure they are prepared for postsecondary education and the workforce. Toward that end, Career Connect Washington established a statewide, three-step, career connected learning continuum: Career Explore, Career Prep, and Career Launch.

### *Policy Role: Understand and Design Solutions*

In May 2017, Washington Governor Jay Inslee created the Career Connect Washington Task Force, made up of leaders from the business, labor, government, nonprofit, and education sectors. The Task Force concluded that while Washington had many excellent career connected learning programs, it lacked systemic supports to achieve the scale needed to have a transformative impact. It also recommended an inclusive planning process to develop a strategic plan, including policy recommendations to overcome barriers to scaling programs with quality. This planning process began in early 2018 and concluded in the fall of that year. The plan was transformed into legislation following a groundswell of support from stakeholders in every region of Washington.

The legislation was passed in April 2019, along with significant funding to begin implementation. In its first year, Career Connect Washington delivered significant results by facilitating, connecting, and motivating people across the state to make career connected learning navigable, coherent, accessible, and high quality. Career Connect Washington is committed to success for every Washington student, particularly those who are farthest from opportunity.

To accomplish this, Career Connect Washington stood up a statewide coalition of regional networks, intermediaries, industry associations, career connected learning coordinators within the K-12 system, and industry champions. It also created a program endorsement process and a grant program, including four rounds of rapid response grants to expand earn-and-learn opportunities for Washington's young people. More than 150 programs are serving thousands of young people at every level of the career connected learning continuum—Career Explore, Career Prep, and Career Launch. Career Connect Washington met its first-year goal of 10,000 students enrolled and is on track to meet its second-year goals. Career Connect Washington has the ability to not only understand policy but also inform it – designing solutions that better support young Washingtonians.

Learn more about Career Connect Washington's policy work in JFF's [Equitable Pathways Hypotheses Spotlight](#) on policy.

## Education Systems Center of Northern Illinois University

[Education Systems Center of Northern Illinois University](#) (EdSystems) is a statewide intermediary in Illinois that is committed to expanding college and career pathways, building better bridges to postsecondary education, and strengthening state- and community-level data capacity and IT systems. EdSystems carries out these efforts by working at the state level to form and lead key interagency and public-private collaborations that drive policy priorities, deepen public system integration, grow public and private financial support, and collect aggregated data. The organization also builds networks in communities where it provides deeper technical assistance, facilitation, and policy implementation.

### *Policy Role: Design Solutions and Lead Implementation*

EdSystems not only designs solutions but also works to implement them on the ground. The passage of the state's Postsecondary Workforce Readiness (PWR) Act in 2016 offers an example of the robust policy role EdSystems plays. The legislative process started in 2012, when the Illinois P-20 Council, with EdSystems as the active intermediary, established the PWR Steering Committee, a cross-sector group that met regularly for a year and compiled a report identifying key success factors for supporting student transitions from high school to postsecondary education and careers. After publishing the report, the committee, with the help of state policymakers, spent a year working with leaders of state agencies to write a bill to address the report's recommendations. After three years of back and forth, the bill passed the Illinois House and [the PWR Act](#) was subsequently enacted statewide with bipartisan support.

But the work didn't stop there. Since the bill was signed into law, EdSystems has worked with communities and districts across the state to implement PWR policy mandates. Toward that end, the intermediary has worked to convene stakeholders and partner with high schools, community colleges, and employers, and those efforts are beginning to yield tangible results. For example, in the Northwest Suburbs of Chicago (Districts 211, 214, and 220), work to scale dual credit—a priority of the PWR Act—has resulted in more than 6,500 students enrolling in at least one college course in 2018, and as a result remediation rates have dropped at least 2 percent across all three districts. In Rockford, Illinois, there was a 505 percent increase in 12th grade dual credit enrollment from 2017 to 2018. Those numbers show that the policy EdSystems helped design, and its efforts to implement that policy, led to increased student participation in college coursework in high school and greater representation of students enrolling in college and career pathways—putting young people in Illinois on a stronger track to graduation and postsecondary success.

## YouthForce NOLA

[YouthForce NOLA](#) is an education, business, and civic collaborative that prepares New Orleans public school students to succeed in high-wage, high-demand career pathways and facilitates systems change to ensure equitable outcomes. YouthForce NOLA connects young people to economic opportunity by building pathways, creating access to work experience and training in both technical and employability skills to ensure success in both work and life.

### *Policy Role: Mobilize and Inform*

In New Orleans, YouthForce NOLA operates in a highly decentralized education ecosystem, adding a layer of coordination that is unique. As the career and technical education (CTE) intermediary for New Orleans, the organization plays a significant role in understanding, leveraging, and influencing local and state policies.

YouthForce NOLA recognizes that its policy work is in the initial phase and is therefore making an effort to enhance its role and deepen advocacy efforts for its policy initiatives. Toward that end, the organization is mobilizing – hiring a director of policy and convening a policy committee consisting of workforce, education, and CTE policy leaders in the state and region. It also strategically partners with organizations that are already active in policymaking, including Greater New Orleans Inc., a regional economic development organization serving 10 parishes in Louisiana that has a history of influencing regional, state, and even national policy.

The policy committee creates an annual policy agenda to focus on the most pressing issues. For example, YouthForce NOLA identified funding as a key area of focus and is convening a revenue working group of local and state officials to ensure that New Orleans schools are obtaining the maximum amount of public funding available for CTE. This working group and YouthForce NOLA's school support staff have been able to bring in nearly \$1 million in additional funding for CTE in New Orleans.

Learn more about YouthForce NOLA's policy work in JFF's [Equitable Pathways Hypotheses Spotlight](#) on policy.

## CareerWise Colorado and CareerWise New York

[CareerWise Colorado](#) and its adaptation in New York City, [CareerWise New York](#) are U.S.-based variations on the Swiss youth apprenticeship system. In the CareerWise program, youth apprentices split their time between their traditional high school classroom and the workplace starting in grade 11 and completing their apprenticeships in their 13<sup>th</sup> year. They earn a wage while receiving hands-on work experience where they can apply their classroom learning each

week. By the end of their apprenticeship, students will have earned a nationally recognized industry certification and some college credit and will have begun to build their professional networks. Employers who invest in the program have a well-trained employee in their talent pipeline, an opportunity to mentor a young person in their community, and the possibility of bringing in a more diverse workforce.

### *Policy Role: Advocate and Mobilize*

An important component of a strong career pathways system is that students earn not only traditional college credit but credit for their experiential learning experiences as well. Some colleges allow credit for learning outside of the classroom. This means the faculty have agreed that such learning is valuable and will assess what is learned in an internship or apprenticeship for academic credit. Whether or not to award this kind of credit is still a point of contention in the academic community. CareerWise Colorado and CareerWise New York (which was incubated by and recently spun off from [HERE to HERE](#)) have been successful in opening access to credit for learning at work. CareerWise Colorado brought about policy change through legislation, and CareerWise New York helped to modify institutional policy.

To get there, CareerWise Colorado worked in partnership with the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) and other advocacy groups, such as [Colorado Succeeds](#) and [Young Invincibles](#), to build a broad coalition in support of the legislation. The coalition, which included business organizations, higher education institutions, industry trade groups, education reform organizations, and individual businesses advocated for the legislation as a route to a more competitive workforce. The change would provide working adults and nontraditional learners with opportunities to attain a degree or credential based on their learning at work. The bill was signed into law by Governor Jared Polis in July 2020. It requires the CDHE to develop a process by which public higher education institutions will award “academic credit for postsecondary education based on work-related experience” by 2023.

In the case of CareerWise New York, City University of New York (CUNY) has a decades-long history of collaborating closely with the New York City public schools and with nonprofit youth support organizations like [HERE to HERE](#). Leaders at CUNY’s Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) and Lehman College were open to granting credit for learning through apprenticeships. The CareerWise New York team at [HERE to HERE](#) formed committees with the business and computer science departments at BMCC and Lehman, since these were the career areas in which apprenticeships were offered. These committees included faculty and administrators from each department as well as CUNY’s central office. BMCC already had courses that met the needs of apprentices and, with the CareerWise New York team’s mobilization, agreed to admit them. For the business pathway, the committee adapted an existing course so students receive credit for their apprenticeships as well as for an academic

class. For both pathways, the CareerWise New York team brought in employers to discuss how projects students completed at work could qualify for credit. Through this collaboration, BMCC and Lehman revised their articulation agreement so the credits the apprentices earn at BMCC can be transferred to Lehman. BMCC also decided to offer the course to high school to apprentices through their [College Now](#) program.

Although they have the same mission, these two organizations operate within very different policy environments. Both advocated for the policy change they needed and mobilized interested coalitions and stakeholders to make this change a reality. As a result, both CareerWise Colorado and CareerWise New York have policy that better supports their work—reaching more young people and helping them prepare for college and careers.

## Conclusion

As those examples show, state and local intermediaries can engage in a variety of activities and strategies to succeed in their unique policy ecosystems. It is clear from these stories that the role intermediaries play in policymaking is critical not only to expanding equitable pathways but to creating new opportunities for youth in their communities and states.

Intermediaries are essential to the success of state and local education and workforce development systems. Organizations can use their positions and their power to support, create, and scale best practices that equitably expand economic opportunity—that goal should be their priority as they define their policy roles. For intermediaries that are just getting started on their policy journeys, as mentioned previously, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Each individual intermediary has to identify and embrace the policy roles and responsibilities that make the most sense in its state and local context to have the greatest impact.

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### About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For more than 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)

### About Building Equitable Pathways

This work, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, aims to provide youth with the information and support they need to make informed choices for their futures—especially young people who have too often been denied access to these key resources. The goal is to dramatically increase the number of young people, ages 14 to 24, who are Black, Latinx, or experiencing poverty, who have the agency, social capital, skills, and credentials needed to thrive in the workforce and in life. A deep commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion stands at the heart of this initiative. <http://www.jff.org/equitablepathways>