



# Preparing American Students for the Workforce of the Future

## Ensuring Every Student's Readiness for College, Career, and Civic Life

By Laura Jimenez

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The United States has failed to prepare all students for college and their careers. That failure has enormous consequences and has led to inequitable educational, economic, and civic opportunities that are disproportionately borne by Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students and workers.<sup>1</sup> These students' and workers' rates of dropout, remediation, under- and unemployment eclipse those of their white counterparts—not to mention the ever-widening wealth gap between whites and communities of color. These communities of color also vote at lower rates than whites, leading to a government that is less responsive to their needs.<sup>2</sup>

Today, a new threat is already worsening these gaps. As the coronavirus pandemic devastates America's health, economy, and workforce, a comprehensive recovery will likely be slower for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students and workers, whose jobs are less likely to offer remote work or employment benefits such as paid family or sick leave. Whether the threat is old or new, the remedy lies in addressing three systemic gaps in education. From early grades, students are not prepared across a wide range of skills; students are not exposed to a rich set of career preparation activities; and school accountability systems are not oriented around successful career and civic outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

This issue brief lays out a framework for a K-12 education research agenda that will uncover policy solutions for how best to prepare students for college, career, and civic life in a rapidly changing workforce and society. Through a range of research reports, CAP will dig deeper into three systemic gaps in the education and workforce training systems that hinder students' career and civic outcomes. Specifically, this research will address the lack of:

- Early exposure to career options, particularly in grades K-8
- Holistic preparation for college and careers in the future workforce and civic life across academic and socioemotional factors
- Orientation of school accountability systems around the outcomes of college and career readiness as well as the attainment of good jobs

At a minimum, the policy solutions to address these gaps will include the integration of laws, regulations, and funding for K-12 schools, higher education, and workforce development to build streamlined pathways to good jobs. They will involve the development of ecosystems of schools and local employers to expose teachers, students, and their families to a broad range of careers. And they will lead to the creation of local accountability systems that hold schools accountable for this more expansive approach to preparing students for the future.

Before discussing these three topics in more detail, this brief provides insight into CAP's new research approach, which aims to be more responsive to community needs and desired solutions. Then, it highlights the importance of taking a systemic approach to preparing students for the future of work and civic life, as students need a broad range of skills and experiences that schools alone cannot provide.

### Community conversations

CAP will embark on a series of community conversations across the country in areas with a high proportion of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous populations. These conversations will be a unique way to collect data about the needs and potential solutions for the communities this research is intended to affect. The conversations will focus on how community members define the future workforce; how they learn about new industries and occupations; how well their schools help students prepare for this future; and how their schools should be held accountable for preparing all students. CAP's eventual policy recommendations will be informed by students, parents, educators, advocates, policymakers, and employers.

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### Why preparation for college, career, and civic life requires a cross-systems approach

When students are prepared across a broad range of knowledge, skills, and abilities, they not only get better jobs, but they also engage more actively as citizens—especially in activities such as voting and community participation—which leads to greater voice and influence in society.<sup>4</sup> However, schools by themselves cannot instill the complex set of skills and abilities that adequately prepare students for their careers and civic life. It will take resources and knowledge that come from broader parts of the community. For example, with employer engagement, education may more adequately reflect the career preparation and training needed for current and emerging local industries. Likewise, local community organizations can also be partners in engaging students civically.

Collaborations must center on preparing students for good jobs—the kind of jobs that afford economic security and participation in civic life as opposed to occupations that require few skills, pay low wages, or are vulnerable to outsourcing. Research shows that workers in good jobs are also more engaged as citizens and

are better able to influence the laws and policies that affect their lives.<sup>5</sup> Achieving consensus on the defining characteristics of good preparation, good jobs, and good citizenship in the 21st century is a critical first step. Most states have definitions of college and career readiness.<sup>6</sup> However, these definitions often focus on college readiness, lack sufficient detail to guide daily interactions with students, and are not connected to good future jobs.

Without consensus on the skills needed to secure good jobs and become good citizens, schools and their local partners will not develop structured pathways for students to progress from education to training and, ultimately, careers.

### What is a good job?

While characteristics such as benefits, pay, opportunities for advancement, and organizational culture contribute to what good jobs look like, there are other factors as well. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development defines good jobs as those in which employers adhere to three principles: 1) Good jobs exist within an ecosystem where high-quality jobs can flourish; 2) they prevent labor market exclusion and protect workers from risk; and 3) they adapt to the work of the future.<sup>7</sup> A recent Gallup Poll outlines 10 dimensions that characterize good jobs: level of pay; predictability and stability of pay; stability and predictability of hours; ability to work remotely; job security; employee benefits; career advancement; enjoyment of work; a sense of purpose; and the power to change unsatisfactory aspects of a job.<sup>8</sup>

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## Early career preparation

The first topic in CAP's future of work research agenda is early career preparation. CAP's previous work shows that most schools lack the strategies and resources to expose students to careers and industries, especially in early grades.<sup>9</sup> The effects of this gap are enormous. Most students enroll in high school course pathways that lead to a dead end and leave students ineligible for their desired postsecondary options.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, factors outside of school—such as students' socioeconomic status—end up playing a greater role in student choices when they are not sufficiently informed and guided in school.

Research shows that students' life circumstances—including income level, gender, and immigrant status—have a stronger influence than their academic performance on their career aspirations and workforce outcomes.<sup>11</sup> Student perceptions about certain industries form when they are as young as 10 years old and remain unchanged at the age of 14.<sup>12</sup>

These data are not surprising, as students' circumstances also affect the quality of career preparation experiences that are available to them. Educators in the United States are only just starting to agree about the importance of early career preparation programs and what those programs should look like.<sup>13</sup>

Educators and students in low-income communities lack opportunities to learn about jobs in the future workforce. The reasons vary by community, however, as many low-income communities lack a diverse pool of employers, and many low-income schools lack relationships with employers. This long-standing inequity creates an imperative for local employers to engage with schools to create a variety of high-quality education and career preparation opportunities beginning in early grades. These can include advising on curricula to reflect industry needs, hands-on learning, student advising or mentoring, excursions to job sites, and career talks. Because parental values and expectations also greatly influence students' career choices, parents must be included in this effort.<sup>14</sup>

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## Holistic preparation for college and careers in the future of work

The second topic of CAP's future of work research agenda is holistic preparation for college and careers in the future workforce.

Research and practice have led to consensus on the different dimensions of readiness all students need for college and future careers. These include academic mastery across a range of subjects, technical training either in a specific field or in cross-cutting skills such as computer literacy, and 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and collaboration.<sup>15</sup> Most states include these in their definitions of college, career, and life readiness, and some elements of these definitions are included in states' school accountability systems.<sup>16</sup> However, what's missing are specific systems to develop these skills equitably across all students and ways to measure students' attainment.

Nearly every aspect of how Americans work has changed over the past 50 years.<sup>17</sup> From the types of jobs we perform to how we perform them, there are ways in which we work today that were unimaginable even 20 years ago. This change in work and the types of jobs Americans perform looks different depending on one's perspective, particularly to those historically locked out of the kind of jobs that promote economic prosperity. This will be even more true as advances in technology drive how we do business and as the digital divide widens.<sup>18</sup>

Too many people will be left out of the future of work. They lack opportunity to develop the critical academic, technical, or cross-cutting skills that allow them to participate in this evolving workforce. For example, Black people are overrepresented in support roles—such as in food service, truck driving, and clerical roles—that are most often affected by advances in technology.<sup>19</sup> Across three cities—including Gary, Indiana;

Columbia, South Carolina; and Long Beach, California—Latinos are sometimes at even higher risk of job loss due to automation.<sup>20</sup> Without addressing persistent deficiencies in preparation, the United States will continue to exacerbate the wealth and opportunity gap that is currently at its highest level in 50 years. Given the interdependent nature of the economy, these gaps hurt everybody.

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## Accountability for establishing and maintaining high-quality pathways to good jobs

The third topic in CAP’s research agenda is how to hold schools accountable for the outcomes of all students—starting in early grades—in the future workforce and civic life. Today’s school accountability systems focus too narrowly on reading and writing as measured by test scores. These systems incentivize schools to focus on test scores rather than the broad range of academic and social skills as well as career preparatory experiences that students need to be prepared for life and future work.

Early career preparation must be holistic—meaning it must support the development of academic knowledge and skills, technical skills, and 21st-century skills—in order to set students up to be competitive for future good jobs. Accountability for pathways to these jobs must involve formal and sustained collaboration among education and workforce systems. It must also include employers. This type of accountability extends far beyond what can be captured in test scores, which account for more than 50 percent of current school accountability systems.<sup>21</sup> Accountability systems drive administrator and educator behaviors, so the next generation of accountability systems must provide an incentive to drive behaviors that better prepare students for tomorrow’s workforce.<sup>22</sup>

Educators and employers together must identify what systemic changes will result in the development of seamless pathways from education to training, and to good jobs of the future. They will likely need to measure the benchmarks discussed earlier such as early career preparation and holistic readiness. To address historic opportunity gaps, they will also need to measure how they use their resources to close such gaps both to improve the return on investment and to advocate for additional resources from local, state, and federal funding sources.

The disparate effects the coronavirus crisis has had on the U.S. economy emphasize the importance of building systems of accountability for pathways to good jobs. The mishandling of the crisis led to historic unemployment rates in most states in the months after March 2020.<sup>23</sup> Unemployment rates for Black and Latinx workers are usually higher than white workers, and they are currently double or triple their comparative rates from one year ago.<sup>24</sup> Together, Black and Latinx workers represent 36 percent of all essential workers in service industries, and many of these jobs offer low pay and no benefits.<sup>25</sup> Black and Latinx individuals also voted at rates that were, respectively, 6 and 18 percentage points lower than that of white voters.<sup>26</sup> Voter suppression and gerrymandering are historic causes of these low rates. There are also data linking income level with voter and civic participation.<sup>27</sup>

The U.S. education and career training systems should produce better outcomes than they are currently producing. In order to do so, local communities must measure and be held accountable for instilling the dynamic set of skills and abilities that students will need to secure good jobs of the future. Some of these skills come from early and regular exposure to different industries, occupations, and working professionals. Education and training should also prepare students to engage civically, and measuring students' abilities to do so should be a part of local accountability systems.

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## Conclusion

There are significant gaps in how schools prepare all students for good jobs in the future workforce. As noted in this brief, these gaps exist in three areas: early career preparation, holistic preparation, and accountability for establishing pathways to good jobs. CAP expects that communities know these gaps exist and want them remedied.

Ensuring that these critical elements are thoroughly addressed requires formal and sustained collaboration between schools, colleges, and local employers, with federal and state governments leading the way. CAP will propose critical changes to education and training laws and resources, as integrating these elements will help to sustain these collaborations. There are issues related to policies, budgets, and curricula that are governed independently but must be interwoven and aligned to ensure that seamless pathways are developed for students.

For many, this type of collaboration will present an entirely new way of working together—but if carried out with intentionality, it will result in a brighter future for all students.

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## Endnotes

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