



NEW SKILLS READY NETWORK  
EVALUATION: STRATEGY BRIEF

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# Deepening Collaboration

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December 2025

Collective Impact, a foundational framework for the *New Skills Ready Network* (NSrn) initiative, includes five conditions for systems change: a common agenda, continuous communications, shared measurement, a strong backbone, and mutually reinforcing activities. Among the conditions, NSrn site teams highlighted the value of the backbone organizations for convening partners, providing momentum for pathways system improvements, and holding team members accountable for project commitments. Teams also identified other conditions as playing significant roles in their NSrn work: establishing a common agenda and developing shared measurement systems to facilitate data sharing across education levels.



## Site Examples

The following are examples of how sites implemented the Collective Impact framework:

**Supported adaptive change.** Guidance on Collective Impact notes the importance of backbone organizations for managing adaptive change, which requires people to learn new skills, change behaviors and priorities, and work across new boundaries rather than technical solutions.<sup>1</sup> NSrn teams described ways in which the backbone organizations assisted them in managing adaptive change. For example, to deepen partner engagement, the Denver team held a one-day “futures retreat” for team members to brainstorm what career pathways could like in the future. Participants

## About the NSrn Evaluation

From 2020 to 2025, JPMorganChase supported the *New Skills Ready Network* initiative, led by the Education Strategy Group and Advance CTE. RTI International conducted a mixed-methods evaluation of NSrn to examine changes in career pathways system policies, practices, and student experiences in the six participating U.S. metro areas. The six sites were: Boston, MA; Columbus, OH; Dallas, TX; Denver, CO; Indianapolis, IN; and Nashville, TN.

### About the NSrn Briefs

This brief is one of five that highlight findings and examples of the following key strategies for systems change that were identified by the evaluation:

- Deepening collaboration
- Designing pathways using a systems perspective
- Strengthening pathway navigation and transitions
- Improving equity and the learner experience
- Amplifying and influencing state policy

These strategy briefs, along with a brief on data and reporting, are housed on the [NSrn evaluation website](#).

<sup>1</sup> Dominique Samari and Paul Schmitz. (2024). *Backbone Leadership is Different: The Skills and Mindset Shifts Needed for Collective Impact*.

appreciated the chance to think creatively and to build stronger relationships through concentrated time together. Boston team members also described the importance of developing deep relationships, understanding, and trust among team members through communication about organizational priorities and challenges and other team-building activities.

**Created shared measurement systems.** Changes to education data systems can take significant planning, coordination across data collection entities, and testing to implement fully. Sites initiated activities within and beyond their project teams to expand and improve the collection of data on career pathways students and programs. The Nashville team, for example, identified data sharing gaps among secondary and postsecondary institutions that resulted in disconnected and incomplete information. To address the gaps, the team worked together to reach consensus on key metrics to measure student retention and progress to postsecondary education and careers. They also established a data sharing agreement between the K-12 public school system and Nashville State Community College, and created a dashboard that showed admissions and first-year momentum metrics across participating postsecondary institutions.

In addition, Nashville and other NSrn sites recognized the importance of developing a “data culture”—an environment where data is accessible and used routinely for decision-making—to inform pathways system improvements. Features of Nashville’s data culture included the development of a tool for sharing data on transitions from secondary to postsecondary education, and a process for reviewing data on high school graduates who had postsecondary plans but failed to enroll the following fall (i.e., “summer melt”) and following up with them.

**Established a common agenda.** A first step in Collective Impact is to create a shared agenda, which the [Collective Impact Forum](#) describes as “coming together to collectively define the problem and create a shared vision to solve it.” The NSrn site teams began with a flexible common agenda set by initiative leadership to strengthen pathways systems, which sites adapted to fit local needs and contexts by adopting specific activities within that agenda. For example, in Dallas, the Commit Partnership aligned the NSrn work to an umbrella initiative, Dallas Thrives, which focuses on increasing the number of young adults in the county that earn a living wage and convenes key workforce and education partners. One of the Dallas team’s priorities was to address data alignment challenges and needs to provide better information on students’ pathways progress. The team convened a data working group to create and oversee implementation of a shared data framework and build the capacity of secondary and postsecondary institutions to track both college and career pathways metrics. This led to development of the Pathways Management Tool, which

automates data collection on dual enrollment completion in early college pathways and provides enhanced reports for advisors, students, and families. The team also enlisted the Labor Market Intelligence Center at Dallas College to provide data on in demand jobs/pathways to Dallas ISD and provide professional development to teachers on the data's use.



## Other Backbone Contributions

Developing career pathways systems requires close coordination of education and workforce systems, programs, and partners. The sites' experiences in using Collective Impact to guide their work offer additional lessons about the role of the framework and backbone organizations in pathways systems change, including the following:

- **Connections to other relevant initiatives.** In several sites, the backbone organization leveraged their and the project team's education and workforce system networks to connect with other relevant initiatives in the community and state, such as initiatives to further STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) education in high schools, or workforce development in priority industries. Sites described how these efforts reinforced and supported their NSrn work and laid the groundwork for collaborations.
- **Communication to raise pathways awareness.** In addition to strengthening communication within the partnership, backbone organizations coordinated broader communications as well. With backbone support, sites held convenings, disseminated newsletters, and launched website redesigns to share NSrn work with key community partners, including students and families.
- **Consistent leadership during change.** NSrn began at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in significant workforce change, including in education. The sites reported being able to address staff turnover by leveraging their backbone organizations to provide stability and help get new staff quickly up to speed on the initiative.

To learn more about the NSrn evaluation findings, see the other briefs and evaluation reports at <http://nsrn-evaluation.org>.