



NEW SKILLS READY NETWORK  
EVALUATION: STRATEGY BRIEF

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# Designing Pathways Using a Systems Perspective

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READY NETWORK

To address uneven pathway quality and access, the *New Skills Ready Network* (NSrn) sites worked to transform existing pathway *programs* into regional pathways *systems*. Aligned with the principles of Collective Impact—a foundational framework for NSrn—site teams shifted their perspective from viewing pathways as isolated programs offered by individual organizations (e.g., schools and colleges) to recognizing them as requiring networks or ecosystems of schools, postsecondary institutions, and employers working together.<sup>1</sup> Team members saw their role as strengthening relationships and building the collaborative capacity of organizations engaged in the delivery of pathways. Teams supported systems thinking and development by documenting and assessing current pathways and gaps, establishing processes for improving and updating pathways, and creating coordinated outreach to partners, students, and families.



## Site Examples

The following are examples of how sites applied a systems change perspective to strengthen and coordinate their pathway offerings:

**Mapped pathways to assess and improve programs and supports.** Using school- and higher education institution-level data, sites mapped existing and new pathways to identify where additional programs and supports were

## 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](#).

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

needed (e.g., enhanced advising and work-based learning opportunities) and to help students and parents with pathway navigation. For example, after data showed limited pathway opportunities in four Boston public schools, the site team piloted new pathways aligned with the state’s framework for high-quality pathways in those schools. The team also developed maps to help students and parents navigate Massachusetts’s state-designed pathway options. Pathway documentation also informed the creation of tools to help advisors assist parents and students in pathway selection.

**Created a standardized process for improving pathways.** To ensure that pathways stay current, sites established processes and guidance for engaging different pathways partners in updating them. For example, the Academies of Nashville—a high school reform initiative that linked students’ learning to real-world industries through themed career academies and partnerships with local businesses and organizations—had been in place for more than a decade when NSrn began. The NSrn team recognized a need for updates to reflect emerging economic trends and industry changes, and address labor market gaps in fields such as advanced manufacturing and information technology (IT). The team developed a process for employers and other interest-holders to provide feedback to academy programs on local labor market needs and trends, and to update pathways in response.

**Coordinated employer engagement.** Educators and employers in NSrn sites described fragmented and/or siloed partnerships, resulting in unclear lines of communication and employers receiving duplicative requests from individual schools and programs. To streamline employer outreach and engage employers at the district or regional level, sites (and sometimes districts and postsecondary institutions) established employer coordinator positions to provide advice on pathways development and expand work-based learning activities. In Columbus, the team established the Emerging Talent Manager role to serve as the liaison between Columbus City Schools and businesses. As a first step, the manager hosted a series of roundtables with employers to understand their hiring needs and barriers; roundtable findings resulted in a simulated work-based learning pilot and a series of trainings for employers (on effectively supervising youth) and for teachers (on communicating with employers).



## Other Pathways System Development Strategies

The examples above describe key strategies used across all sites to formalize pathways systems.

Other strategies were also observed in some sites, including the following:

- **Development of data systems to support system-level analysis.** In most sites, data on one or more key aspects of pathway programs, such as work-based learning or secondary-postsecondary transitions, were lacking. To address these gaps, several sites contributed to broader data system development efforts, such as developing a shared data framework and definitions in Dallas and advising development of the state's education longitudinal data system in Denver.
- **Coordination with other pathways initiatives.** Prior to and during NSrn, the sites' pathways ecosystems were influenced by other pathways initiatives, such as New Skills for Youth and Launch, as well as field-specific programs, such as Accelerate ED, a Gates Foundation initiative to support the development of a Cybersecurity and Information Technology Operations pathway in Indiana. As a systems change initiative, NSrn provided coordination across education levels, programs, and partners and the other pathways-related initiatives in which these entities were engaged.

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