

# Developing New and Innovative Approaches to Support Career Readiness

Leading superintendents highlight how their districts are creating greater workforce development, career readiness and real-world work experience for students

***District Administration*** recently hosted an online roundtable discussion with superintendents from across the country about how their districts are including workforce development and real-world work experience in their career readiness programs. The district leaders highlighted their unique approaches to supporting multiple career pathways and the importance of developing community and business partnerships to help students succeed after high school.



**HOSTED BY**  
**Pete Gorman**  
 Superintendent-in-Residence  
*District Administration*



(Top) Wichita students work on an engine as part of their career and technical education coursework. (Bottom) Everett Public Schools in Washington offers students a medical and health career pathway.

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**Joris M. Ray**  
Superintendent  
Shelby County Schools  
Memphis, Tennessee



**Diana L. Greene**  
Superintendent  
Duval County Public Schools  
Jacksonville, Florida



**Chad E. Gestson**  
Superintendent  
Phoenix Union High  
School District  
Phoenix, Arizona

## How do you approach career planning in your district?

**Ray:** We look at career planning as being important from K through 12. We start exposing students to career paths by having guest speakers beginning in elementary school. We have a transition program in fifth grade, where our students visit a career location and spend time with local leaders to help decide on what they want to pursue and narrow down their career interests.

In the seventh and eighth grades we use Naviance to do a complete career skills inventory to help students develop a four-year plan. At the high school level, we have developed a great relationship with our chamber of commerce, so students can learn from local business leaders. We also have a strong partnership with FedEx, through which 50 to 75 juniors and seniors are able to learn in internships by shadowing top executives, and have the opportunity to not only get a job there after graduation, but have FedEx pay their college tuition while they are employed.

We are so excited about our partnerships with our community, and the chance to provide students with opportunities to pursue careers.

**Greene:** We have multiple pathways and programs in our district to expose students to career planning. We're very proud of our work with our local chamber of commerce, which is connected to a regional collaborative partnership called JAXUSA, that works with our career and technical programs to help students learn about career pathways that are available right here in Jacksonville. We tell our students that whatever your post-secondary dreams are, we want you to fulfill them and then come back here to Jacksonville and be part of this community.

Our community knows that the better educated our students are, the more we can grow as a community. So these partnerships are very important to help

our students understand the opportunities that are available to them.

**Gestson:** We are a high school district made up of 22 high schools. Every freshman starts by creating a "four-plus-four" plan, for their high school years and the four years after high school. One of the priorities of our strategic plan is college and career readiness, so every pathway that we built across our system could lead to either college or career.

We have robust partnerships with business and industry because that is where the expertise and resources lie, as well as opportunities for externships or internships. Just recently, we launched a massive citywide partnership between our schools, the Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce and some local foundations, called ElevateEdAZ, which will provide even more resources and planning for our seniors.

I often remind people that the point of college is to be prepared for a career, so everything we do must be connected to both college and career.

**Saltzman:** Building relationships with stakeholders is so important to this, you must engage with a broad spectrum of people. We meet monthly with business partners and work with our local chambers of commerce. We had the first student case of COVID-19 in the entire country here in our district, and we have been fully remote since March. So, it has been very challenging, but also fruitful, because of the buy-in from our community. There is extremely high unemployment in this area, so it is crucial that we get our kids to learn about careers, embrace a work ethic and work partnerships, and come back to this community.

**Thompson:** We built college and career readiness into our strategic plan. We've made it a priority that all our students are college or career ready, and we have policies to support that goal. For example, every high school student in our district is required to take a CTE

course and a financial literacy course, and we now have a Director of College and Career Readiness for our district.

We approach those two paths of college and career in the same way; we want our students to have the skills to be prepared for either one after high school.

## What role does your state play, in terms of mandates or legislation?

**Johnson:** Our state has done significant work instituting policies to ensure that post-secondary preparedness becomes a focus for schools and districts across Tennessee. There is a Ready Graduate indicator that is part of our state accountability framework, which simply means that all students must take at least four early post-secondary opportunities, which could be CTE courses, AP/AB certification, or achieving an ACT score of 21 can serve as a replacement.

As a result of the policy change, school systems have been motivated to think differently about how we approach our work. At the system level, college and career readiness is part of our strategic plan, and three of our Focus Five Performance Targets are post-secondary related. It has transformed the way we approach our coursework and our partnerships with post-secondary institutions.

**Daugherty:** Here in Virginia, our state has prioritized not only raising academic achievement, but also improving career education. And so, our district has focused on removing all the obstacles in the way of students in dual enrollment, IB or AP courses, and connecting them to our CTE programs.

We want our students to understand how to get the best of both worlds, by getting a strong education academically but also gaining career skills that they can use in the future. We require all our schools, K through 12, to have business partners through our chambers of com-

merce, which have been very supportive. We've also added dual enrollment courses to our CTE programs, through nearby John Tyler Community College.

We're working to meet or even surpass those state mandates, but also fulfill the mission of our strategic plan by emphasizing with our students that they can go through our schools with strong academics and gain career skills at the same time.

## How do you connect college planning with career planning?

**Thompson:** We are starting an internal internship program within our district, by having students intern with different school district departments like finance, operations, facilities and others. We also created an Aviation pathway that begins in middle school, where students can gain aviation industry certifications and take college courses at WSU Tech while in high school. We have a partnership with Spirit AeroSystems, which is headquartered here in Wichita, so our aviation students can interview and gain employment there right after graduation. We're trying to make these pathways lead to a successful end through these partnerships.

**Ray:** Our ReadyGrad program prepares students for success whether they are planning to pursue a degree or enter the workforce after graduation. Students can earn college credits and obtain industry certifications while still in high school, giving them a significant advantage when it comes to getting scholarships, internships or career opportunities. Our program has grown from 250 certifications last year when I first started as superintendent, to nearly 3,000 certifications awarded this past spring. Our governor's claim to fame was being from a college and career technical program himself, so he believes in CTE and has provided funding. We have a relationship with



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our local Memphis Light, Gas and Water, and give students unique experiences in a variety of technical career fields. Our school board has invested heavily with an \$8 million investment in this program, and it has paid great dividends.

**Greene:** We have created academies in some of our CTE programs, which require dual enrollment. So students are learning career skills while gaining college credit at the same time. One of our best is an Advanced Manufacturing academy, which has a partnership with Johnson & Johnson. These academies connect students with real careers and corporations that could potentially hire them, and that gives students the inspiration and motivation to work harder and raise their achievement.

**Daugherty:** It is so important to increase students' awareness about what college and career learning is, and what their future could hold. Too many students think that they'll do one or two things in life, but as we tell our juniors and seniors, 40% of all college students change their major in the first year. So, the question is, whichever path you take in life, how are you preparing yourself now to continue to gain knowledge?

**Saltzman:** We have been working to build work apprenticeships in our area. We also have seven colleges within our district's 80-mile radius, so we're trying to incorporate them into our business partnerships and build connections with them. It is so important to weave together career readiness with college readiness.

## How do you rely on local business and industry to support work-based learning experiences?

**Gestson:** One unique partnership we have developed is with our local trade unions, which are providing paid internships. Students in our carpentry program, for example, work towards a certificate while in high school and when they graduate, are first in line for apprenticeships. We've had tremendous interest in the construction trades.

We serve primarily low-income youth and so it's important to us that if they choose a career after high school, that it is a high wage career. We also launched a computer programming high school, offering programs in coding, cy-



(L) A student in the Hamilton County Schools drives an electric car in the Chattanooga Green Prix race. The car was built by students in the eLab at Red Bank High School. (R) Students in the Duval County Public Schools gain career skills as part of the district's Culinary Arts Academy.

bersecurity, networking and software development. We have many unique partnerships within that school, some of which offer paid opportunities. We prioritize paid internship opportunities, but we also prioritize working with companies that are willing to hire our students and pay their college tuition once hired.

**Johnson:** We're very blessed to have an extremely engaged local business community and chamber of commerce, and an organization called Chattanooga 2.0 that spearheads our work. We launched Future Ready Institutes, which are career academy schools within schools, and we have over 19 of them in our high schools at this point. Local entities like Blue Cross, Unum, our local power board and others have provided a quarter-million-dollar funding commitment, which has been transformational. But it's not just about dollars, what is so important is their willingness to have students on site and to hire them in the future.

Our local public education foundation has had a program in partnership with Blue Cross called Step Up, through which businesses throughout our community offer internships to a couple hundred of our students every year. We're very fortunate to have a community that believes in the direction we're headed and is willing to put their resources and finances behind it.

Career has a strong meaning for us. This work is not just about finding a job, it's about pursuing a career and finding what you're good at and passionate about. We have hundreds of students participate in a wealth of internships with local businesses. We've been very fortunate to have a community that believes in this work and is willing to provide resources and financial support.

## How do you market your programs?

**Gestson:** Through our new local community partnership ElevateEdAZ, we share an employee whose main function is developing business and industry partnerships that lead to high quality internships or externships, but particularly paid opportunities and those that offer tuition reimbursement in college. That has been the primary way we market these

programs, and it has been very successful.

**Thompson:** We have a Business and Education Alliance here in Wichita, which has local business leaders and educators meet regularly to discuss internships, mentorships and career exploration opportunities. We have advisory committees for each of our 26 pathways that include representatives from companies and businesses interested in or related to that subject area, and we rely on them for marketing and outreach to help build our internship and mentorship programs.

**Greene:** The goal of our marketing is to make students aware of all the programs that are available to them. We outline all our academies, and we identify which ones are sponsored by a corporation with a goal of hiring, so students know that they could get a job in that program. We have MOU's with all our corporations that have academies in our schools. One of our best is our credit union academy, which runs real credit unions in five of our high schools, and students in that program are hired immediately after high school and the sponsoring credit union will pay their college tuition, if they choose to attend.

## What challenges can stand in the way of innovative college and career programs?

**Gestson:** One struggle has been outdated state legislation, particularly mandates for seat time in high schools. We want to get our students off campus in business and industry settings, doing work-based learning and getting credit for it.

Across the country, K-12 education is ready and willing to think and operate differently, but some outdated policies and legislation can stand in the way. Also, there is often a misconception in the business community that they must wait until students are age 18 to have an internship. We've been using our chamber of commerce to raise awareness with businesses and enable 16- and 17-year-old students to get internships.

**Johnson:** We're hoping for new legislation that will change or update the requirements for



(L) A Life Force helicopter from the Erlanger Health System visits students in the Erlanger Institute of Healthcare and Innovation, a Future Ready Institute in the Hamilton County Schools. (R) Superintendent Chad Gestson visits with CTE students in the Phoenix Union High School District.

teachers and licensure for teaching post-secondary courses. High school teachers should be able to earn certification to teach Composition 101 or other similar courses for college credit. We are challenged by many students having limited transportation options, so we want to offer as many post-secondary options on campus as possible.

**Daugherty:** We have been working hard to get all our high schools to allow half schedules, co-op programs and partnerships to increase the number of internships available. A challenge for us has been getting the business community in nearby Richmond and Petersburg to understand the benefits of having partnerships with our co-op programs and offering internships for students. We're trying to expand our programs because we believe that every student should have an internship during their senior year, not just students in career programs.

## How do you fund your programs?

**Daugherty:** We could always use more Perkins Act funding, especially with the recent changes to it, but most of our funding comes from our local government. It is so important that local and state governments understand the importance of adequate funding for these programs. We aren't even able to meet the workforce

demands of our region, because there are so many job openings. Many states pushed college readiness for so long but neglected career readiness. In the past few years, that has begun to change because of the nature of skills that are needed in the careers of today.

**Greene:** We rely on Perkins Act dollars, as well as state and local funding and our chamber of commerce for financial support. Also, the corporations we partner with agree to come to the table with funding. Our mayor runs a CTE summer work apprenticeship for our students, so the city pays the salary of students in that program.

**Saltzman:** It's so important to have local funding for these initiatives. We also use Perkins funding, and our mayor is a big advocate for this work in our schools. We get additional funding and support from Boeing, which is nearby.

## How important is it to engage families when it comes to career readiness?

**Daugherty:** We have become a majority-minority district in the past two years, and we now have more students receiving free and reduced lunch than the city of Richmond does. And so we're trying to help parents understand the importance of careers, not just

thinking about college all the time, but help them to realize they could get the best of both worlds by getting college credit while in a CTE program. It's a challenge, but we want to help parents understand that their child can prepare for both college and a career at the same time, and it doesn't cost them a dime.

**Johnson:** Parent engagement can be challenging because at the high school level, parents tend to be more concerned with extracurricular activities, clubs, sports and so on. We focus on bringing parents in, getting them involved and making these programs as engaging as possible for parents. We show them the value, and emphasize that their child can earn a great living as a result, whether that is through attending a two- or four-year institution or by going straight into a certification and a career field.

**Ray:** Family engagement is essential to the success of students. We know that our families desire consistent, transparent and formative communication about their child's school and district initiatives, and we always strive to meet those expectations. We created the position of Parent Ambassador for each of our more than 165 schools, to mobilize the community and get parents to understand and buy into what we're doing. We're always striving to increase meaningful family engagement and participation.

## Among your district's career readiness initiatives, what are you most proud of?

**Gestson:** I'm proud of a lot of things in our district, but our Metro Tech High School is one example. It's a career readiness high school, but it has our highest graduation rate, highest college attendance rate and lowest dropout rate. Nationally, we know that students in CTE coursework go to college at a higher rate than students in all-AP courses. That shows the power of connecting college and career at the same time.

**Greene:** The connections we've made with our local corporations and government. We just passed a \$2 billion referendum here for the first time ever, and I'm convinced we were able

to get support for that because these partnerships helped to spread the word about the great work we're doing in our schools.

**Saltzman:** That we built the right business and local government partnerships so that our students can enter the workforce right here in our community.

**Thompson:** That we embraced career readiness enough to include it in our strategic plan so we could emphasize it as much as possible.

**Ray:** The \$8 million investment we made in career readiness programs, which is paying off with close to 3,000 industry certifications earned by our students. Implementing Naviance was part of that investment we made.

**Johnson:** The engagement of our business community, and their willingness to give their time, talents and resources. And I'm so proud of our students.

**Daugherty:** The expansion of opportunities in career fields we've created, that we can help our community and business partners to hire qualified people, and that we can give our students the option of pursuing high-quality career opportunities or going to college.

*Naviance by PowerSchool is the leading college, career, and life readiness (CCLR) platform that enables students to discover their strengths and interests, create actionable goals, and find their best-fit path after high school. Naviance helps ensure that all paths students take after high school lead to fulfilling and meaningful careers.*

*Naviance is the only comprehensive college, career and life readiness solution that provides work-based learning opportunities for students within the platform. Having all student college and career planning and outcomes in one system allows schools and districts to be able to see a holistic view of their students planning, monitor and track progress, easily report on state requirements, and make data-driven decisions related to school or district strategies.*

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